

Chapter XXI

Fine Lines

Every trade or profession has some chore akin to mucking out the stables. For accountants it is the audit; for physicians, the autopsy; and for teachers it is called “grading papers.”

This Peyton Derente was doing one bitterly uninsulated December afternoon, not in his doghouse office but down the hall in Dr. Ecklebury’s, where the radiator actually worked. Eck had gone home, declaring it not a fit day out for man, beast, or undergraduate. The high so far was twenty degrees Fahrenheit, with a plumb-zero windchill whistling in to turn Peyton’s fingers into jointed icicles.

He tried grading with gloves on, despite their loosening his grip on his red pencil, and that grip already enfeebled by these final exams. Each student in Art 110 had been told to pick two slide-projected works of art, identify them, and provide a critical mini-analysis of their Significance to History. One student had chosen Manet’s *Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe*:

This shows a naked girl having a picnic with two men still wearing coats etc. causing a scandal because this girl was not a goddess in “tasteful paintings” but an ordinary naked girl outdoors that next posed for his painting “Olympia” that caused more scandal one newspaper said she had a yellow belly and probably a prostitute...

Putting down his pencil, Peyton covered his eyes for a frosted-flaky moment. “I can’t be responsible for that,” he decided, and moved on to recoil from the next paper.

La Chanteuse Verte (The Singer in Green), pastel by Edgar Degas. Unabashed in his hatred of women, Jews, and the working class, Degas portrays the Singer as an ANIMAL with bestial features. But she stands defiant with head held high, one hand making a gesture of SCORN as she tries to cover more of her exploited body, protecting her identity as a person AND an artist, which explains the green...

Mmph? Peyton glanced around at Dr. Ecklebury's shelves of reference books. Pulled out and thumbed through a volume on Degas, to see if he could see what this student had read into *La Chanteuse*.

Glossy plates. Horses, dancers, bathers. Anonymous women caught climbing into and out of tubs, washing and drying themselves, engaged in personal hygiene. *Nude Woman Having Her Hair Combed*: whose pose should have recalled Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* to Peyton's mind, and not a brazen image of RoBynne O'Ring. Whom he had never seen (nude or otherwise) teasing her burgundy-streaked 'do.

Yet the image persisted—coolly knowing, insolently challenging, shamelessly undulating into, say, a rully bitchen shower stall after a liberal application of olivaceous oil—okay! yoicks-tallyho! here we *go!*—definite stirring in the underbrush so give chase with gloved hand, urging on your hound after the transient fox—

—*rrr rrr rrrumble*—

—*rrr rrr rrrumble*—

...fizzlesticks...

God DAMN it.

Her too. Them both. Him most. It All.

Back to being dumbstruck by the banshee's whammy.

*

Eleven days ago, the Saturday before last, Skeeter banging on his apartment door—“Surprise! I brought RoBynne!”—“Aaay handsome, we're paying a social call on you!”—the girls just out of their Jazzercise class, lustrously toned, clad in matching toreador pants and checkerboard tanktops.

“TuBEWlar place y’got here,” said RoBynne, idly snapping her toreador waistband. “Ew, lookit all the foggin’ books! Do y’like read these?” *Snap. Snap.* Once, twice, and again: loudly elastic.

“Why did you bring her?” went her surly host in Skeeter’s ear.

“To lend moral support,” said Skeeter, brightly enough, given how awkward things had been since Thanksgiving.

“Yo Skee, anything good to drink here?”

“Should be some of that yummy Cabernet left, if he hasn’t scarfed it all. Cabernet? Chardonnay? Something with a neigh in it, anyway—”

“Here a nay, there a nay—”

“—everywhere a nay-nay!”

(Shriek/howl of laughter.)

“ANYway, I’ll go see—”

“Awesome! Pop me a cold one.”

“Oh yes help yourself,” Peyton grated, dropping into his swivel chair. RoBynne promptly sat on his lap and looped an arm around his neck, enveloping him in a froth of lemon-lime perfume. Carbonated, like Mountain Dew. Shifting her foxy posterior (once, twice, and again) to accommodate/evade his baying hound of love—

“So, I hear y’like raspberries. Wanna guess what color French-cuts I got on?”

“*Hey!*” from the kitchen. “Quit describing your panties to my fellah!”

“Oh, *yer* fellah, hunh?”

“Oh, *yer* panties, hunh?”

“What the devil-hell IS this?” Peyton demanded, trying to stand, but prevented by RoBynne’s extended height from displacing her proportionate weight.

“It’s those ‘megrimms’ of yours,” said Skeeter, coming in with a tray, bottle, and three full glasses that all slopped over as Skeeter caught sight of them together and burst into stagger-giggles. “Oh dammit! See what you made me do—”

“This is *my* honey now,” RoBynne announced, sticking out her tongue. “We’ll find *yew* a new dude later.”

“Are you going to let her sit on me like this??”

“Well you know *I’m* not a lapsitter,” said Skeeter, placing a sloppy glass in Peyton’s hand. “Makes me feel like a ventriloquist’s dummy. So it might as well be Minnie the Moocher there.” She took her customary leap onto the sofa. “I mean you’ve been a chronic gloomy gus lately, so Ro and I decided to come cheer you up—”

“—yeah, like by force if necessary.”

Peyton glared at them, at RoBynne’s earbangles: trapezoidal bits of mirror, catching and flashing back every light in the apartment. “Sometimes you just get into the dumps, is all—”

“Not *me*.”

“Me neither.”

“Specially not now!”

“Not at Christmastime!”

“Fifteen shopping days left!”

“Lookit me on Santy Claus’s lap!” said RoBynne. “Ho-ho-ho—aaay, ain’t y’gonna be decorating this place up?”

“Of course we are. We’ll start tonight—”

“I do not decorate for Christmas,” Peyton told them. “At most, I sweep the floor.”

His guests went *eww* at that, and RoBynne flicked his nose with a long-nailed finger.

“WOMAN! WILL YOU DESIST!”

“Oh m’Gahd, that wasn’t meant to hurt—y’want some Midol?”

“?????”

“It’s like all the painkiller I got. Oh whaddaya think, it’d grow ya *boobs*?”

Pavlovian slant down her plunging checkerboard into a New Wave push-up device. Add those accents to *décolleté*! A garden of live flowers, not rosy like Skeeter’s (“Would you believe this turk never buys me lingerie?” “Rully? that’s awful!”) but ultraviolet, a shade to go with the quarter-pound of eyeshadow and eyeliner and mascara, everything between RoBynne’s brow and bust elongated, obliquified—

—everything between Peyton’s belt and seat inflating, dilating—
 —faltering, loitering—
 —shriveling, withering—
 ...fading drily away...

(The banshee’s whammy.)

*Now King David was old and stricken in years; and they covered him
 with clothes, but he gat no heat...*

“My legs are falling asleep.”

RoBynne snortled and said she could take care of *that*, which caused Skeeter to cackle and throw a sofa cushion that was supposed to miss but didn’t, dousing the swivel chair’s occupants with yummy Chardonnay or Cabernet, everywhere a nay-nay—

*...and let her stand before the king, and let her cherish him, and let her
 lie in thy bosom, that my lord the king might get heat...*

—RoBynne squealing, “Y’little ZOD! Trying to hose us down, are ya?”—letting go of Peyton’s neck to wipe off her dampened chest, saying, “Like ‘em? They’re rully mine, even if they didn’t show up till I was fifteen”—Skeeter cackling as though this were all one big prize hoot—

*...and the damsel was very fair, and cherished the king, and
 ministered to him: but the king knew her not.*

—till Peyton forced his know-thee-knotted legs to leap to their feet, depositing RoBynne O’Ring on the carpet with a bottomfirst WAUGH as he stood over her and snarled:

“I HAVE NO NEED FOR AN ABISHAG!!”

RoBynne, after some thought, decided she’d been insulted.

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“I don’t give a rat’s ass what she’s decided!” Peyton told Skeeter a day later, over the phone. “What kind of ‘painkiller’ is she on, anyway? Benezdrine?”

“Now Peyton, get real. RoBynne’ll smoke dope if she can bum it off somebody, but she doesn’t do anything else. And even if she *did* she couldn’t afford it, she spends all her

money on clothes and things. Besides, she used to go with this guy Billy Caligula who freebassed a lot and kept trying to off himself—”

“They sound like the ideal couple! I can’t believe you brought her here without a word of warning—”

“Jeez I’m *sorry*, I just thought you could use another friend is all. Don’t be mad—”

“I am not mad! And why are you so all-powerful anxious to find me another ‘friend’? Gotten weary of my company, have you?”

Evidently not. She took his discourteous attitude much better than he would have guessed, not losing her cool or even raising her voice much but calling him night after night, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday. Still opening their conversations with, “I’m here. Talk to me,” but gabbling less and listening more, prompting him along with an occasional question.

“What’re you thinking about?”

“Mmph?”

“Is it RoBynne?”

“No it is not RoBynne! I’m sorry she’s your friend and all, but—I *am* sorry she’s your friend and all! She’s a perfect example of an undesirable influence.”

Undesirable? Didn’t he find RoBynne attractive? He could admit if he did, RoBynne after all was still a teenager, with ultraviolet underwiring and really long legs; didn’t Peyton know how many men would kill themselves to have such hot stuff on their laps?

“Is *that* why you brought her over? Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you both.”

“I brought her over because she wanted to see you. Because she likes you, or at least she did.” (Pause.) “Just because someone is gaudy and bitchen and talks like a loon, that doesn’t make her a bad person.”

“Mmph.”

“Don’t you think RoBynne’s been a good friend to me? I’d’ve been lost at SMECK without her.”

“So you’re saying she’s never tried to get you into drugs?”

(Silence.)

“Well, you don’t have to tell me—”

“I don’t do drugs,” Skeeter said quietly. “I don’t need them. The day we first met, I told you that. Remember? ‘I can get high—’”

“—on an Eskimo Pie,’ yes, but we’re talking about your bosom chum, the one who’d never steer you wrong, not even at the BoogaBloo Angel and those other so-called dance clubs. You mean to say Our RoBynne hasn’t introduced you yet to some friend-of-a-friend with French-cut connections?”

“No, Peyton.”

“No, she wouldn’t do that, RoBynne looks out for your interests. Refresh my memory: how many times has she told you that you drink too much? In so many words?”

Without rebuke: “Have *you* ever told me that? In so many words?”

(Silence.)

Sunday, Monday, Tuesday. They moved on to other matters, and Peyton found himself telling her about the APE monograph’s stagnancy, about *Current’s* deep-sixing his cartoons.

Very nettlesome to be drawn out like this. Especially when you’re the one used to doing the drawing.

“I’m not exactly institutionalized—you needn’t practice your counseling on me,” he told her on Wednesday. “And at what point did you become the listener, anyway? I thought that was *my* role in this relationship.”

“Well remember, I’m a curious person—I like to burrow into things.”

Social Worker Squirrel. He could see her writing all this down, filling out case study forms:

Patient is secret, self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. Edges his way along the crowded paths of life. Being rich enough, he has no right to be dismal or reason to be morose. Assessment: Classic anal-retentive maladjusted degenerate who declines further intervention.

He gave Skeeter the gist of this, that grating note in his voice again; and when she made the fatal mistake of saying “I’m just trying to be *supportive*,” he slammed down the phone with a great CRASH.

Refusing to answer it the rest of that night or all the next day. Instructing Tim the lummoxy intern to take While You Were Out messages for him, to which he didn't respond. Friday he worked late at the Old Library, preparing next week's finals; and that night at home, no calls came.

Bit of a pang, cutting her off like that.

But there was a dust-off-your-hands afterglow, too—as you might feel after finally cleaning out the garage or attic or bungalow, pitching a lot of sentimental minutiae.

He would simply have to put Skeeter Kitefly out of his mind; and towards that end on Friday night he drank a large Pink Gin that sent him straight off to sleep.

And dreams of fire extinguishers.

Hardly necessary what with your lighting already-lit matches that promptly go out, one! two! three! sweep 'em away, shadowboxing, shadowsealing sarcophagi, a Campbell's Soup Kid imploring you to extricate her before it's too late, you can hear her pounding away inside the can except it's more like a bottle, a belljar, an X-ray or saranwrap—and there she is in all her oblivion, stifling, smothering, coming up for the third upheaval, clinging to the surface before you thrust her back under, extinguishing her candleflame once and for all, *mmm-mmm-mmm* NOT good—

—on which note Peyton awoke, face crammed into his pillow.

This was it, he realized, The End: he had done what he'd dreaded doing almost from the start. With one crashing hangup he had snuffed out the past four months—no, the past four-and-twenty years of Skeeter Kitefly's hard, hard life. And a horrible cold wind swept through him at that moment, blowing back the covers, hauling him out of bed to run around flipping on every light in every room.

The phone did not ring that weekend.

Nor could he bring himself to pick up the receiver and dial.

Some, in his place, might have been able; Peyton could only feel the lack, the loss, the wrenching sense of desolation. Isolation. Distortion.

Traces of her presence whichever way he turned: in the commandeered closet, the taken-over chest of drawers, the medicine cabinet crammed with nature's necessities, the

handfinished hardwood goldleaf picture frame. Have to pack it all up, ship it off to Wheeville, all the sights and sounds and scents of her.

He went up to the miniloft to wash down a couple of yellow pills first, but didn't. Decided to sit down at the drawing table, get some sort of grip on what he'd have to do instead.

Sat. Dec. 17th

Dear Skeeter

First of all I find it odd I call you that considering I've always called your sister Mercedes since I met her when she was going through a don't call me Sadie phase thinking "Mercedes" more appropriate for an art student rather like I've thought "Skeeter" more suitable for a country-western singer but if I addressed this to "Kelly Rebecca" you might think it's from your sainted mother and that could pulverize you names can do that the most closely guarded secret of my youth was that my own middle name is Farquhar—

He tore this run-on into end-runs and threw them into separate wastebaskets to prevent their ever receiving a rejoinder.

No: quit with the evasions, equivocations, outright lies; your nose is long enough already. Explain what you refrained from explaining when she asked *What do you think?* Since it wasn't a matter of what you do think, but of what you don't—about Life and its Meaning.

Don't go into cases, though. Don't spell out the whens and wheres and hows. Above all, make no mention of the Girl of your Dreams. What would be the point? Putting faith in catharsis was too much like putting your charred-to-a-crisp hand back into the fire. Once burnt, twice fried; once wept, twice cried. Simply offer some kind of apology. Sorry, little girl, I did my damndest. *Mille regrets.*

Not for the first time, either.

As Bill Sikes said, just before falling off the roof with his head in a noose:

“THE EYES AGAIN!!”

Always the eyes. The first Skeeter-feature he'd taken in while they were spreading

eagles in Brecknock Hall, even before the feel of her 101-poundage, had been her blazing baby-blues. And RoBynne O’Ring: it was those obliquified askant glances that had stirred his notice, before he redirected it décolletéwards. And Dream Girl’s eyes—

Dark. Decidedly. Bright, like shoebuttons are supposed to be; but black, with pupils blending into irises. Sloeshaped, crescenty, almondesque: the sort of eyes that, even wide open, always looked half shut. A touch of cunning there, in every sense of the word—that, perhaps, had been the key to her uncommon attractiveness. Likewise RoBynne’s, however much he might deny it. Likewise Skeeter’s, needless to add. All three belonging to that category of well-favored young women about whom the word “pretty” was not the first to spring to mind. With Skeeter, of course, the first word was “cute.” (Excuse me: *cuuuute*.) A quickfire definition of RoBynne O’Ring might be “striking.” And as for Joyce Finian—

At first glance you’d have to call her “sweetfaced.” Dark eyes under dark lashes under wide-open half-shut lids. Intriguingly curlicued nostrils, set dead-center in a heartlike visage framed by very long, very glossy, very black hair parted straight down the middle, pinned back at either side yet falling past her shoulders to her waist, to tickle sweeter curves than any Rossetti ever revealed—

—out of order—

—ahead of ourselves—

That first morning, that last day of the last spring of the Nineteen Seventies...

He dropped by the Unfinished Aquarium (so called because it looked just like one) to drop off his latest *No-Nazz* drawings and guess what, there she was, sitting primly behind the Selectric. *Hello-o-o, Hepzibah!* Lordy let her be coming to work here and not to repossess the typewriter, which would have been perfectly possible given the always-uncertain financial condition of A.K.A. Enterprises.

“May I help you?” she asked. Softspoken, voice like an oboe.

“I’m the Art Department here,” he told her.

“Oh! How do you do? I’m the new office manager. Joyce Finian—” She held out a fine-boned hand which he took and pressed, resisting the overromantic urge to raise it to his lips.

Slim and slender without being skinny. Very pale, very white, Irish-colleenish with a long swanny throat emerging from the neck of her sleeveless blouse. Bare arms daintily prickling with gooseflesh—probably not from the touch of his hand, alas.

“My name’s Derente, Ms. Finnegan.”

“Mine’s Finian,” she corrected.

“Finian, not Finnegan. Let me begin again—” Which caused her to duck her head, go *tee hee hee*, and come up displaying pearly choppers in a smile so wide it made those almondesque eyes disappear outright.

“Ah...” went Peyton. “Anyway, welcome to the Elsew *No-Nazz*,” he said, and was starting off toward the Muffin Man’s office when she stopped him.

“Um—can I ask you something? Is it always this cold in here?” She hugged her exquisite elbows and Peyton had to *harrumph* before explaining that the Unfinished Aquarium’s air-conditioning system had long ago escaped human control and reverted to untamed wildlife.

While Ms. Finian enjoyed another duck-and-titter, he took concupiscent inventory. How *are* things in Glocka Morra? Clothing neither new nor stylish but very clean and neatly pressed. Pastel blouse, modestly opaque. On the smallish side, by no means flat but fragile-looking, at least as far as could be glimpsed behind the Selectric. Quite a woman, Little Fan! A delicate creature, whom a harsh breath might have withered! As if to shield herself she wore a lot of citrussy perfume, as though she bathed in a tubful of fresh lemon juice—imagery that would provide Peyton diversion during more than one midnight hour to follow.

As would Joyce’s blush. Excuse me: her BLUSH. Catching him examining her personal space, a flood of crimson welled up out of her pastel collar to sweep over the cygnet throat, the cheeks, the ears, the forehead: her face aflame with *intense* self-consciousness.

“Allow me,” Peyton said, hurrying to swipe somebody’s jacket from the Aquarium closet and drape it gallantly around Joyce’s shoulders.

BLUSH-duck-titter, smiling from crimson ear to ear. “Thank you, that’s so nice.”

Peyton repeated those very words half an hour later when he left Muff Amberson’s office (shouting “Next time I want your opinion I’ll take an onion and add pee to it!”)—and

encountered the back of Joyce Finian, bending over a file cabinet. Ahem: Jolly Dame Nature at her very *finest*. Concealed not a whit by the waistlength hair, the borrowed jacket, nor the skirt cut full and free to below the knee but stretched drum-tight over the *derrière*.

News for Scrooge: Little Fan needs an upgraded name.

Phenomenal!

Superlative!

And visible panty lines you wanted to take home and keep on your parlor mantel.

She glanced up as he and Priapus left, giving him a ladylike smile and wave and “Bye.”

Yes, this was clearly a nice young woman, a demure young woman—euphemistic too, one who would use quaint phrases like “I have to go powder my nose.” An immensely polite young woman who would, without irony, thank you for handing her a stack of scrawls to be typed up immediately.

Joyce took over the day-to-day running of A.K.A. Enterprises, relieving *No-Nazz* editor Bonzo Krauss of payroll and petty cash, keeping tabs on contributors, proofing their eccentric copy. She would coo at photos of people’s pets; become almost physically ill if anyone’s birthday went by without circulating a card for all to sign. She worked hard, too hard as Peyton saw it, and at the end of her first week he urged her to kick back and come to a Freak-Up Friday powwow of the Dilated Nazztrils.

“A few drinks, a few laughs, some debate of topical issues. I promise we’ll keep any vulgar mudslinging at a bare minimum.”

After some hesitation Joyce agreed, submitting with that oddly monotone *tee hee hee* to Peyton’s holding open the Marr’s Bar door for her, his holding the chair next to his private throne for her, his ordering a glass of sparkling wine for her. She admired all the alcohol-related art on Marr’s walls, created and donated by generations of Merely SAD students.

“Which ones did you do?” she asked Peyton.

“That one there, the archetypal Ugly Customer; and a couple of dipsos behind that pool table. The best one, I’m afraid, is on the inner side of the men’s room door. Not for your eyes, Ms. Finnegan.”

“Finian.”

Joyce volunteered little else about herself. Just out of college; a liberal arts major without a terribly marketable degree; glad to get a job right away at A.K.A. but also working part-time at one of Elsew’s many highrise hotels.

“The Hilton? The Hyatt?”

“The Excelsior,” she said with a wistful grimace. “They say it *used* to be nice. And I’ve got to be getting there now. Thank you for inviting me. And for the wine.”

“Need a lift? I can drive you, if you don’t mind riding in a khaki-colored VW Bug.”

“Oh, no thanks,” she said, still wry. “I have a ride already.”

Such was the first hint that Joyce was engaged—or that she had been, but had broken the engagement—or that it was *semi*-broken-off, but she and her fiancé had temporarily patched things up. In any event a small diamond ring appeared, at intervals, on the appropriate finger.

It would be pleasant to report that Peyton’s gentility overcame his libido and kept him from hitting on Joyce; but though he made no *crude* pass or proposition, there were many lingering looks at Little Fan’s fundamentals, below and above and in between.

Sexual harassment, as a concept, was only beginning to be broached at this time, and Joyce had to put up a bold front the day she couldn’t fit a new correction spool onto the Selectric and Peyton, when asked for assistance, took an overobvious gander down her goosebumpy blouse.

“*Peyton.*” Said with moderate reproach, both hands clasping blousetop to Anne Boleynlike throat. “You embarrass me.”

After that he stayed out of her live-flower garden, committing fewer peekaboobos. Still hung around by her desk, having arm’s-length chats with her; relating anecdotes about the French Impressionists, whose artwork Joyce was collecting in postcard form.

“I love the colors,” she’d sigh, holding the cards up one by one, solemnly asking Peyton’s advice as to what matting would go best with each.

So she’s-a-Person-not-an-Object: nothing censured, nothing strained. Ever since his Kojak headshave, women made themselves available to him immediately or not at all. Even

the immediates didn't get emotionally involved, just physically available; and that was damn near ideal for a young man in the late Seventies. Involvements got in your way, stood in your light, and peered over your shoulder like an infernal buttinski.

So Joyce-the-Person he consigned to her fickle fiancé, using her as a basis for midnight imagery when he wasn't preoccupied with some available lady's flesh—most often that of a fellow Use 'Em GTA named Cheryl, who had big green eyes and spearmint-breath and unconventional views on Photorealism.

Thus things stood for the next six months.

Then Bonzo Krauss threw his “Kiss Off the Seventies & Kick Off the Eighties” party, the last of its kind at the Unfinished Aquarium. Peyton, arriving late and alone, waded indomitably into the melee—“Gangway there! Displace yourselves!”—and stumbled on Joyce standing all by herself in a corner. Her sweet face, framed by a black turtleneck and longer-than-ever tresses, looked pallidly wan and woebegone.

“Ms. Finnegan! Surely you're not the wallflower type.”

“Oh Peyton, thank goodness—can I get you a drink or something?”

Or something, oh yes.

She brought him what tasted like really cheap rye—“Damnation, Bonzo! Dismantle your still!”—and stuck closely by his side. Not that he was about to chase her away.

“Where's Cheryl?” she wanted to know.

“Haven't the foggiest. Home for the holidays, I presume.”

“I thought you two were such a hot item.”

“Lukewarm at best, Ms. Finnegan.”

Duck-and-titter. “*Finian*. You're always forgetting.”

“Finian, not Finnegan. Shall we begin again?” He looked down into her dark eyes, sloeshaped and crescenty, before they disappeared behind a wide bright smile.

“Yes. Let's.”

“How's life with Semibrokenoff?” he asked, not thinking.

“Who?”

“This whiskey is truly undrinkable... I beg your pardon. I was referring to your

fiancé, whose name I'm also always forgetting."

"Well," said Joyce, "maybe that's because I don't have one."

"But the ring?" He reached for her hand to check, and there it was.

"I'm not saying I *never* had one." She sounded almost flirtatious. "Why did you call him Semi—what did you say?"

"Semibrokenoff?" Peyton paused and thought this time. "I got the idea from—well, not rumors, but hints I picked up—that he's kind of a Chekhovian character. Lurking in the background, not getting a lot accomplished. Excuse me if I'm mistaken."

She threw her head back, laughing out loud; no monotone tee-hee here. "You are so smart sometimes."

"Only sometimes? May I get *you* a drink, Ms. Finneg—Finian?"

"Okay. Um—some brandy, please." And after he fetched it and they clinked glasses and she took a nibbly sip, she asked: "Why don't you ever call me Joyce?"

"You occupy a position of respect at my favorite periodical—"

"Oh *come* on. Don't you ever talk like a normal person?" Her own voice became throatier, clarinettish. "Don't you like me?"

"Exceedingly," said Peyton. "Or as you once put it: excessively."

"When did I ever say that?"

"When you first came here. You told me I embarrassed you."

Heightening color. "Oh. That. Well, you did."

And do I still? Retrieve that glance aimed for her globular backcurves; show penitence. "I've tried to do better." *But you must admit it's hard.* "But you must admit it's difficult."

Midnight then; Happy New Year.

Joyce looking up, as if to gauge the distance—

—launching forth, as though from a springboard—

—swanny throat outstretched beyond her turtleneck—

—landing lipfirst with an audible *splat* and hanging there suspended, on tiptoe, for the mouth-to-mouth resuscitative moment it took her slender arms to swivel round—

—and execute a link about the neck of her caressee.

*

For six weeks they went out together, by themselves, for lunch or a drink, he being permitted no more than a hug and a peck afterward; definitely no bosomgrope or buttockfondles. Peyton foresaw an old-fashioned courtship ahead, she keeping him on first base while he tried to get fresh and steal second; not at all what he was used to, but neither was it a disagreeable change.

Joyce moved that January from one furnished apartment to another, gently declining Peyton's offer of assistance. No housewarming either—"I move too often for that. I have the worst luck with roommates." Nor would she allow Peyton to take her Back To His Place—unsurprising, at this stage of the grand old game.

The diamond ring remained on her finger. For all Peyton knew, Joyce was in fact fully engaged, and a jealous-raging Semibrokenoff could appear at any moment to challenge him to a duel. What! Kissing his missus-to-be! Trying to take her where the dearhearts that can't elope play! *En garde, monsieur!*

Well, not French for nothing. Keep that foil well-oiled.

So Peyton reflected the day he bought the soppiest-possible Valentine he could find, to give Joyce as a joke. But when he stopped by the Aquarium what did he overhear but Joyce on the phone, saying something sharply to someone about what she and her "boyfriend" might be doing that evening; and at the sound of that one word Peyton felt a blow as though on the back of his neck. Harsh as a guillotine, too.

He turned on his heel, stalked ponderously out and away, paying no-never-mind to Joyce's calling after him, her hastening to catch him on the stairs—

"Hey, wait for me."

"Why?"

"Aren't you taking me to Marr's?"

"Won't you be too busy with this BOYFRIEND of yours?"

And a truly indescribable expression touched her sweet pale face.

“But... that’s... *you*... isn’t it?”

If a blow on the back of the neck has an exact opposite, that was what Peyton felt then.

He gave Joyce the cream-of-mush Valentine, which she took absolutely seriously to the point of shedding tears, which Peyton felt empowered to kiss away.

“We’re ‘involved’ now, aren’t we?” she asked.

They were. He was.

The climax (one, at least) followed two weeks later, on a Friday doubling as Leap Day. The Ravenelle Collection, a traveling Impressionist exhibit of high repute, was opening downtown; Peyton had wangled preview passes and invited Joyce to accompany him. She got all excited, dressing up in a smart white suit over a fluffy black blouse under her old yellow slicker.

“You certainly look lovely today, Ms. Finnegan,” Peyton said. She no longer corrected him on this but took it as an endearment and blushed all the more. “You’d *better* blush,” he added. “When we get there, no one will have eyes left for the paintings.”

When they got to the Elsew Art Museum, things promptly went awry. A guard ordered Joyce to check her slicker at the cloakroom—“I was going to! He didn’t have to be so mean”—and another, just as gruff, barked at Peyton to quit taking notes. Were that not enough to rankle, the Ravenelle’s layout, lighting, and lack of accommodations more than made up the difference.

“A massacre of masterpieces!” Peyton thundered, seizing Joyce’s arm and hustling her back to the cloakroom.

“But I didn’t get to see everything—”

“Nobody got to see ANYTHING, with that *ignis fatuus* illumination! I know Degas and Cassatt went blind—Pissarro too—but not *before* they did their painting! Come with me! I’LL show you how an Impressionist exhibition ought to be organized!”—overcoat flapping after him, Joyce trotting anxiously at his heels.

“Where are we going?”

“To my place!” And when she hung back at the khaki Bug’s door: “Good God, woman, do you think I’m going to manacle you to my bedroom wall? Call a chaperone to meet us if you want, but come on if you’re coming!”

She tagged along then, alone with him to his home on Saturn Street. Which, like its planetary namesake and Peyton himself, was encircled by a wide belt. (Of Corinthian-colonnaded apartment buildings, in the street’s case.)

Joyce’s first indoor words were, “What a lot of books you have.”

Peyton snapped on the overhead, strode over to one vast bookcase and began hauling down its contents. Opening them to Giverny waterlilies and boats at Argenteuil, look here! and here! you don’t segue from X to Z without Y!—turning pages, sinking to his knees, spreading out the books and propping them open, there! and there! *that* is how anyone with bare-minimal brains would have arranged it!

He felt a tug at his shoulders, looked distractedly up, found Joyce trying to help him off with his coat.

“Thank you. I didn’t mean to treat you like a Sabine woman. Please, make yourself at home—there’s wine in there—pour yourself a glass. One for me too, while you’re at it. And as long as you’re hanging up my coat you should do the same to that godawful mackintosh, it does you no justice whatsoever.”

“Keeps me dry,” she replied. “Um—can I ask you something? Where’s the bathroom?”

“Through there.”

He turned back to his books, adding selections from other collections, treating the boats and waterlilies like so many French Lincoln Logs; and was startled again when Joyce knelt gracefully by his side. Smoothing down her long white skirt, handing him the asked-for glass, clinking it against hers.

“So is this your private gallery?”

“Well,” he heffalumped. “Anyway, this is how *I* would have laid it out.”

“I see. What about thee-ese?” she chirped, pointing to a batch of glowing Renoir nudes. “This part must be for adults only.”

Peyton was reminded of the one-armed art teacher in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* who sent the girls into gigglefits by tracing the bottom-contours of Botticelli ladies, and then, when the girls would not shut up, smashed a saucer to the floor. Peyton almost did the same with his wineglass when Joyce, setting hers down empty, said:

“Can I ask you something else?... How would you lay *me* out?”

Not by staring dumbstruck into her sparkling black irises, anyway. (Dumbstruck he wasn't, not by a hell of a long shot.)

He reached back beneath Joyce's snugly-outlined bottom. Laid a hand on a shiny white shoe. Plucked it off a black-stockings'd foot. Set it in place before two Renoirs. BLUSH-duck-titter as the other shoe was removed and set beside the first—as, with elephantine finesse, Peyton began working his way upwards and inwards.

Many and many a time in the years to come, he would rerun this scene in his mind. First for pleasure and then in light of later accusations, he would replay and reassess it.

Had he seduced Joyce Finian that Leap Day evening? Overpowered her will, inveigled her into a debauch? Or, in light of later actions: had she recognized the Derente name and taken the initiative—given herself to him, with an eye out for what she might gain as a result?

One way or the other, all her clothes got taken off and arranged on Peyton's carpet. (Less carefully as heights were scaled, depths were charged, and clumsy lumpishness returned to pop and rip and snag.) Joyce emerged from within like Venus on her shell or Chiquita on her peel, to coyly model her sweetbodied self. An Orange Girl indeed: translucent skin coloring hotly from the roots of her hair to the tips of her nipples. The earlobes in particular, tomato-red behind their peridot studs, looked ready to hemorrhage; and not just at the rest of Joyce being undressed, but because her Maidenforms were rather threadbare.

Peyton was far from minding. Everything he'd ached to see and touch (*and grope and fondle*) for months upon months, exposed to the light at last AT LAST and better than he'd ever imagined it: no Madame Tussaud waxwork was this, no mannequin polished with Lemon Pledge, but sanguine Finian-flesh living and breathing—

—and all a-shiver. Still February, of course, for a few more hours.

March in like a lion then. He hastened to turn up the radiator before mingling his garments with hers; then into his arms she was swept, and to the bed she was carried, and there sheets were hit, and they became a couple.

In the best *Lord of the Flies* tradition, he was heavy and fulfilled upon her.

So heavy, in fact, outweighing Joyce by a hundred pounds or more, that he feared—after awhile—that she might have been crushed. True to his word, he hadn't tied her up or down or into pretzel-knots; but her passive compliance began to be almost alarming.

“Joyce? Still with us?”

“Right here.”

“Enjoying yourself?”

“Sure.” (Wide bright smile.)

“Any requests?”

“Um—could you please move over just a little?”

I never lose my inhibitions, she'd told him once at Marr's when urged to have a second drink. No regrets but no requests; just a generic hold-me gesture. Up early the next morning to mend her rips and snags with safety pins, then blow him a kiss—say “Thank you for having me”—and head off to the Excelsior.

Something amiss here.

Peyton resolved to treat these misgivings if the opportunity ever arose again. Which it did the very next Friday, when Joyce went out to dinner with him and back to Saturn Street with him and, after a cognac (none of Bonzo's homemade slop), presented the zipper of her dress to him. He managed to unzip it without a jam, continued inward and downward, and went to cookie-popping work.

Compliant passivity instead.

(Mmph.)

(*Mille regrets*, little girl.)

But they were still “involved,” after all; Joyce kept bestowing her sweetness on him,

stared a lot—out the window at the sun, or on the sofa at TV. Leafing through his big Impressionist folios, making *ooh* and *ahh*-type faces but never a noise. Balancing Peyton's checkbook, filling out his tax forms, sewing on his buttons, typing up his thesis: looking after him. When he took a break and came to join her, she would look up with the expression a cat gets while deciding whether your lap is suitable for jumping on; and if it was, she would follow through and they would have themselves a strokefest.

The only time she lapsed from quietude was in bed. Even after the *abbadabbas* were done with for the night, there would be a constant wriggling and fidgeting and heaving of sighs and checking of clock and getting noisily up to pad into the bathroom.

“Restless, are you?” Peyton would mumble.

Evidently so. In May she moved again, this time to a narrow basement room on Venetian Street. Joyce had been in no hurry to have him visit her previous apartment, saying “Sometimes I like to be alone.” But she seemed immensely proud of this new place, of the Tintoretto-shaded flowers blossoming above its windows; and she invited Peyton over with such ceremony that he dared not poke fun, other than to dub it *The Gondola*.

Not much in the way of furniture. A bed, a table, two chairs, curtains at the windows, an old-fashioned Singer sewing machine, a bureau and an alcove containing her spotless Snow White outfits and maybe forty pairs of shoes. Pinned to one wall were Joyce's collected postcards: Monet, Seurat, Sisley, Morisot, matted on sheets of construction paper. Peyton noticed no pictures of friends or family members, no photo albums; perhaps there was *no* family, and Joyce had sprung fullblown out of Finnegan's Forehead.

At the *Gondola* he refined his technique of tickling her ivories (and pinkeries, and creameries)—his big fat fingers deft and nimble on armpit and ribcage as though he were wielding a crowquill over cardboard instead of compelling his susceptible girlfriend to contort, convulse, and explode one night with a *pleez pleez pleez pleez DAAAAH-DEEEE!!!*—

—that left her drenched and drained, and brought Peyton up short.

She gave vent then to a little stream-of-consciousness about her father, who'd gone so far one thirsty day as to drink all of Joyce's perfume, and her stepmother's, and her younger

sister's. There was something about an odd stepbrother too, or maybe more than one; or maybe that was the basis of his oddity.

At any rate she drifted off to wryfaced sleep and never referred to it again, and Peyton thought it best to ask no questions. True or not, it provided the sum total he would ever hear about her early life.

Joyce he did buy lingerie, for her twenty-third birthday: elegant floral confections to replace her utilitarian unmentionables. "Oh pret-t-ty... but didn't you feel bashful, buying these? I know *I* would have."

"Nonsense. I simply told the clerk in a loud clear voice, 'They're for *me*. I intend to lose weight this summer.'"

And why not? That was the summer of his mastery, Peyton taking his M.A. from Use 'Em and being hired by Merely as a fulltime instructor. Joyce attended the commencement exercises and was introduced to Peyton's parents for the first and only time, Lucky Pierre's eyes lighting up (no surprise there) and Antoinette often asking after her afterwards. As one might about a prospective daughter-in-law.

Which should have been a most disturbing thought.

He presumed Joyce covered herself contraceptively in some fashion. She would always disappear into the bathroom beforehand, but Peyton never asked whether it was to insert or apply or imbibe something to prevent his seed taking root. Certainly *he* contributed nothing toward that end, in those easier-to-deal-with days. Yet what *if* pregnancy resulted? Would she demand he do the Right & Proper Thing?

Not a dreadful notion.

Good God...

This, he supposed, was truly Being Involved. The diamond ring, he realized, had vanished from her finger some time ago; perhaps he might see about replacing it. Which would have been easier-to-deal-with had he not just traded in his old khaki Bug—and a considerable chunk of future income—for a brand-new silver Porsche.

Joyce (who'd loved the Bug but took a dim view of the Porsche) *did* make one Right & Proper demand: when the summer heatwave turned horrendous, she implored him to buy

her an air conditioner. He went out and got an enormous one, a by-God dreadnought icebox, that on second thought would probably glaciare the little Gondola—but was the ideal size for Saturn Street. So to hell with the electric bill, my precious, along with the thermometer!

“Um...” said Joyce.

“Mi casa es su casa, querida.”

And for someone who’d been “freezing” at the Unfinished Aquarium just a year ago, she spent a lot of that summer at Saturn Street cozying up to this icebox, shucking down to her fancy new frillies and splaying herself out in front of it. And Peyton would pay sonorous homage to her goosey-swanny beauty, overriding Joyce’s wistful insistence that her thighs and caboose were “fat”—no ma’am! in no way fat! but of a classic quality beyond the power of any romantic artist to capture and sustain.

“Oh gee,” Joyce would say.

*

Then, one fine day—

He switched off the dreadnought, opened all his windows, let in poetic September sweetbreezes: first cool evening in what seemed like a thousand years. They were going out to celebrate, Joyce was in the bathroom touching up her appearance, had been at it for half an hour and he was going to shout, “Aren’t you presentable *yet*? The reservations are for seven!” but only got as far as the “Aren’t” when there came a CRASH and a cry and the sound of hiccup-weeping—

Don’t bother to knock, turn the knob; don’t bother to lock, bathroom privacy being respected at Peyton’s place, which was just as well since otherwise he would’ve had to break the door down and how that would have jarred his shoulder, his arm, on top of which he’d still have found Joyce in there on the tiles, on her knees, face pale as sleet, tears dripping down among bits of shattered mirror. Mixed with what Peyton, in his godawful naiveté, thought at first was spilled talcum.

He even wondered why she’d taken a hand mirror into the bathroom when there was a perfectly good one on the medicine cabinet.

And then; and then.

The higher you are, the farther you fall.

Peyton would have believed anybody else on earth to be a snowbird, including Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and his own mother (who at least mingled with an artful crowd).

But Joyce Finian???

He *had* suspected her of catching a summer cold, from all that lounging in front of the air conditioner, and of trying to conceal it lest he think her contagious.

Eyes brimming, nose running, dab dab abbadab, sniff sniff sniff. Face flushing painfully, then bleached out again except around her darkrimmed eyes and dampchafed nostrils. Peculiar curlicues: trying to explain the pressures of tension, of being a woman, a shortish slightish young Liberal Arts major—it was incredible, having to respond under such strain—he was a jolly male giant with a big loud voice, how could he understand what she had to go through every day, every night, all her thinskinnyed jitters, her anxiety-ridden insecurity?

So what else could she do but lay out a line of fine white powder on the glass?

Toot her own horn, and then—

—it was like being inside one of her postcards. *There* at Giverny or Argenteuil, able to see through Monet's eyes but with heightened clarity—or like looking at a Seurat and seeing it whole, but at the same time each tiny dot was separate and distinct. Each a burst of pure, intense color—

—like sailing over a rainbow.

All it took was Pixie Dust.

At the cost of a gram or two a week.

Which could run you two, three hundred dollars, depending on your dealer and the market; whereas Joyce's takehome pay hardly topped a thousand a month, even adding in extra hours at the Excelsior.

And lately she'd been grinding her pearly choppers, and hearing too many noises at night so she couldn't sleep; her nerves were wearing thin, her nasal passages were inflamed, and she felt utterly humiliated unbosoming herself this way, to him.

Didn't want you to see me like this.

Never wanted you to know.

Well guess what, he had and he did; and thanks to Being Involved, he felt a certain responsibility. Racking his self-absorbed memory for some warning sign he might have detected and averted—but hadn't, so couldn't, so here they were. She dabbing and sniffing; he with not the slightest clue what to do. Having prized his snoot too highly to subject it to California cornflakes, what the devil-hell did he know about their abuse and disuse?

When had she begun? Before she'd met him? Before they'd first hit the sheets? He racked his brain all over again for some recollection of chafed nostrils before then. Made over with makeup, perhaps? Not a happy thought that she'd needed the stuff to cope with *his* pressures, the weightiness of his fulfillment.

So what might Dear Abby/Ann Landers suggest?

To seek counseling, of course; get some therapy from qualified professionals. Actually that sounded fairly sensible—Joyce seemed to agree—arrangements were made—he drove her to the first session, stayed in the waiting room reading a review of *The Stunt Man* over and over while she broke the ice and tested the water—and came out radiant, full of resolve, intending to go cold turkey, you could do that with cocaine, it was all psychological, she would recover scot-free and be good, he'd see; he would be proud of her. She'd be proud of herself. And bursting with pride they went back to his place and made genuine love for once, dispensing with the you-now/me-now to chase after simultaneity.

All it took was a little discipline.

She would be good and disciplined and never touch the stuff again.

Or at least cut back.

Control her use.

Go for days, weeks without it, not acting like an addict.

She wasn't.

She *wasn't*.

(And he really didn't want to go too deeply into what followed; the three years since then had provided too thin a scab.)

Missing sessions with her counselor. Trying another place, not liking their attitude either: they were hostile and arrogant, suspicious of her. She wanted to talk but not to listen. When Peyton tried to “be supportive” (fatal phrase) she would shrink away bristling, often as not. More often, as time went by and he tried to let her be, to let things slide.

Hanging around Saturn Street in exasperated suspense, not wanting to go out, no appetite for anything; picking and snapping at the elastic on her fancy underwear, saying it made her feel itchy. As though bugs were crawling over her, getting under her skin.

And at work it was worse. The *No-Nazz* Election Eve issue didn’t get out on time, Joyce was leaving early and coming in late or not at all, doing less-than-coherent work when she *was* there. Given a warning, then given notice, Peyton demanding a reprieve but Bonzo saying no, the grounds were too shaky, Joyce had to be let go; there were reproofs, recriminations, she departed and disappeared and Peyton didn’t see her again for two weeks.

Letting her phone ring a dozen times at a stretch, finally getting a recording—“The number you have dialed is no longer in service”—and when he went to Venetian Street the curtains were gone from her basement windows, he squatting down to peer in and find the Gondola scuttled, vacant, postcards gone from the wall.

Badgering the Excelsior, getting an I’m-new-here person who had no idea who Joyce Finian might be; getting transferred to an I’m-just-filling-in supervisor, who would say only that Joyce didn’t work there anymore—and possibly never had.

Appropriating the A.K.A. personnel records—but of course Joyce had been the one who maintained those, and there were lacunae aplenty where she herself was concerned.

The lady vanished into thin air, whichever way Peyton turned.

*

A bad time, bad atmosphere, after Reagan’s unforeseen landslide victory: “Gimme That Old-Time Revolution” stood little chance against the triumphant howls of the Far Righteous, their declaring all who opposed them to be inspired by the Antichrist.

The night after John Lennon was killed, Peyton heard a scratching at his door and there she was. Looking brittle of body, pasty of face, hair like black cobwebs—remorseful maybe, but uncommunicative. Where was she living now? What was she doing for money?

Had she gone back to Semibrokenoff, and exactly what part had he played (did he play) in all this?

No answers.

Just that generic hold-me gesture.

Thus she came and went that winter, like something out of unhappy Celtic legend: a muted banshee who slipped away before the dawn. Peyton took to staying home every evening he wasn't in the classroom, abandoning the Nazztrils and other pastimes in case she might show up; though when she did, he felt oppressed by futility. Playing Pietà: Joyce huddled in his lap under a quilt, watching Late Late Shows with her face pressed against his neck, shivering. They saw several old movies in this manner—*The Lady from Shanghai*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *Of Human Bondage*—none of them very cheerful. Heavy flicks.

What reinforcements could he enlist? Two, three times he urged a return to therapy, a detox center, a hospital; but away she would run and not come back for days or weeks. Shouldn't he be taking a firmer stand, *make* her stop somehow, have a straitjacket handy and the phone predialed: I've got her! She's here! Come and take her away ha-ha to the funny farm before she breaks loose and vanishes again!

God damn it, he hadn't asked to be cast in some ongoing madness-takes-its-toll. There was a fine line between involvement and obsession, and Peyton didn't want either side of it.

There was also the obscure fear that They would cite him somehow as being liable, culpable, blameworthy—you mean you *knew* she had this problem, yet you stood idly by and did nothing? (I tried! I offered—) You tried! If you'd at least *doodled* on the test paper, we'd give you *some* credit—

Another night of heavy flicks: Friday the 13th of February, Peyton in the tub when he heard a scratching as of someone's claws a-catching at his chamber door. Towel wrapped around him, he ran to answer; truly your forgiveness I implore—

She stood at his front window, staring out between Corinthian columns, while Peyton dressed and explained that she'd caught him on the verge of making his radio debut. A.K.A. Enterprises was suffering a financial crisis, wild schemes had been hatched to stave off

bankruptcy, the latest taking place this midnight on Sargent Poach's *Scrambled Segue Show*, broadcast live on KLOT-FM.

"The Mighty Yellow Tee, you know... We need every last bit of ballyhoopla we can get... I think I *will* wear a necktie, for moral support... Keeping busy, are you?... Joyce? Still with us?"

He came out of the bathroom in some haste. She remained at the window, her back to him, it still retaining its voluptuous curvature even while the rest of her ebbed and waned.

"Ah... I realize this is radio we're talking about, but... how do I look?"

She turned around.

Peyton had grown somewhat accustomed to her hollow brink-of-drowning eyes, but tonight he was struck by how infinitely *dry* they seemed: all tears shed. The very pupils losing their Glocka Morra glint, dissolving into the irises to form two black holes—

He changed his mind, he wouldn't go, Bonzo and the Muffin Man could handle it without him, he would stay here with her—

And then; and then.

A lass and a lack.

Like that scene at the end of the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, where Kevin McCarthy and Dana Wynter hide in a cave from the pod-people who've replaced their friends. Dana's exhausted, dozes for just a second... and awakes taken over, body-snatched, having *become* a pod-person with coldblooded eyes in a blank masklike face, one of the chilliest images in Peyton's picturewatching memory: *you're next! you're next!!*

"No, you go on." She stepped forward, reached up to tighten his tie, settle his collar. "I'll come back later." All very monotone, like her *tee hee hees*.

He might have invited her to come with him, or to wait for him there, but he didn't. Considered asking again for a current address or phone number; thought better of that too.

She walked him down to the silver Porsche, grimaced at it, declined his offer to drop her anywhere. They embraced briefly, along former lines: her arms around his neck, his hands upon her rump.

"Take care of yourself, Ms. Finnegan."

“I will,” she said.

So he left her; and they parted.

The *Scrambled Segue* endeavor did not pan out. Sargent Poach kicked things off by suggesting the *No-Nazz* do a hardboiled exposé of his invisible parrot, Egbert Soufflé, and went on about how morose Egbert had been since his lover Omelette flew off—

“—to that big cage lined with newspapers in the sky! Egbert never drinks on-air, but he’s frequently hung over—isn’t that right, Egbert?” [*Pained parrot-voice: “Squawwggkh.”*] “So let’s humor him and all you last-minute Valentine shoppers with something new from Gino Vannelli, called ‘Living Inside Myself...’”

*

Act as though nothing’s changed, as if the *No-Nazz* enjoys unlimited life potential. Stroll on over to the campus Book & Supply Store, lay in extra bristol board and India ink for drawing all the cartoons off the top of your head. Every one a guaranteed chucklebuster! “Claptrap Gives You Mental Clap.” “What *You* Need Is a Long Ocean Voyage.” “Okay, Okay! You’re *Not* an Asshole—”

Handing the cashier your Mastercard, she handing it back with a headshake: “Sorry, you’re over your limit.” Astonishment, impossibility, must be a screw-up on somebody else’s part—the students in line behind you clearing *yeah-sure* throats—

To the phone then with an assumption of dignity, calling up Mastercard—yessir, over your limit—must be a stupid computer error, of course. Plain as the nose on a Derente face. If you’d learned nothing else from Lucky Pierre, it was “Lose if you have to—hock what you must—but always pay most of your debts, my boy, and that way they’ll let you keep playing.”

Demand a statement *achtung tout de suite*; find one already in your mailbox, from the bank. Good news here, at least; interest rates on savings were going through the roof and so too, cartoon-style, was the top of Peyton’s head when he opened the envelope and found his account cleaned out empty.

Goggle and boggle: *two* computer errors? Somebody impersonating him? Some—
Pietà piñata.

When had she managed it?

Ample opportunity, over the past year; access to all his vitals; clerical expertise.

Perhaps she'd been biding her time for months.

He signed affidavits, closed his savings account, cut up his Mastercard; did without from then on. Did without many things—such as his silver Porsche, lost before long to the repo man. Why not report her to the police? “My toothead ex-girlfriend ripped me off royally in order to obtain controlled substances. No, I have no idea where she and her sweet ass are, which makes it kind of hard (you must admit it's difficult) to prosecute the latter off the former and return it to my parlor mantel—”

—*yeah-sure*—

She hadn't gone so far as the sung-of Mary Lou, who stole Bob Seger's watch and chain and EV'rything—but that might have been because Peyton owned no gewgaws. Otherwise they too could have been heisted and handed over to some Semibrokenoff entrepreneur.

The Elsew *No-Nazz* folded; the Dilated Nazztrils scattered; the Mercury Theater showed *Atlantic City*, and there to take your mind off reality was Burt Lancaster selling cocaine when he wasn't watching Susan Sarandon anoint her Renoiresque chest with lemon juice.

And yet there were depths still to be charged.

At the steamy end of May, having just given a final exam, he went back to Saturn Street to change his sweated-through shirt. Coming down the hall he heard a Marley's Ghosty sound of dragging chains, followed by a tremendous BOOM that turned out to be his disconnected dreadnought hitting the floor. Deposited there by Joyce Finian, who must've had a key cut by hook or by crook—*Let my love open the door*—except that a sudden wind blew through the gaping hole in Peyton's window frame and slammed the door shut behind him, giving them all a start.

Joyce in tough-chick clothes, no makeup, eyes no longer half-shut but wider-open than he'd ever seen them and not with love either, nor with fright. Beside her was a handtruck, and loading the air conditioner onto it was an undeniably beautiful woman,

wholesome-buttery like the young Shirley Jones of *Oklahoma!* or *Carousel*, but with a top-sergeant's haircut.

"Yikes," she said at the sight of Peyton's perspiring wrath.

"I suppose you think you're going to steal *that* now, and turn IT into snow!" he thundered.

But those were the only words he would get in, as the wide-eyed Ms. Finian opened her mouth.

Molly Bloom ends *Ulysses* with a monologue; Joyce Finian took her banshee leave (and Peyton's air conditioner) after a diatribe. A chew-up-and-spit-out tirade too, executed as if by an etcher's scribe with a diamond point for engraving the finest of lines.

She didn't need "snow" anymore, she'd found her true being, her true self, she'd been deluded by Peyton but knew better now, knew him for what he was: a gross fat man who'd reduced her to a helpless slobbering whore night after night, making her feel defaced and dismembered and why? why had he done it? because he was a fraud and a sham and a very bad man who'd never loved her not once, who wasn't capable of loving anyone, of doing anything but strip her naked and devour her, stab her and shoot her with his rotten Thing that would serve him right if it shriveled up and withered on him, women were far better off by themselves, with themselves, *for* themselves and they were taking this air conditioner not only because she'd *earned* it and *deserved* to have it but as partial reparation for all the outrageous atrocities inflicted on Joyce and womankind, all the misery, the nausea, it made her *sick* when she had to let him kiss her, she only did it because he drove her crazy, and afterwards she always had to *wipe her mouth*, that's right, WIPE HER MOUTH—

Even then, through all the diamond-pointed crosshatchery, he realized this last bit had been swiped from Bette Davis's conniption fit in *Of Human Bondage*.

And, like gimpy Leslie Howard, he could do no more than dumbly take it. Too late for sarcastic ripostes; no swordplay could parry her perforations as his vessel cracked from side to side, twisting in the venomous wind, eyes ears nose throat suffocatingly congested—

"YOU PRICK," she hissed.

And vanished, she and face-averted Shirley Jones, together with their handtruck and the a/c à trois.

Then, at last, all was darkness and silence.

*

Change the locks. Wedge the windows when not there. Bar the door at all times. Make no effort to replace the air conditioner but do without, do without. Answer the phone only to hear *It's about your parents, Mr. Derente, and I'm afraid the news isn't good—in fact, it's quite bad...*

Of course it is. Of course they are.

And: at least this way I won't have to tell them about Joyce.

Then: could she have somehow been the cause of Lucky Pierre and Antoinette's circuslike demise? But no, that would be impossible, unless she was fiendishly clever by half.

Yet: why doubt that? Had he himself not been targeted from the start, turned into a shaven-and-shorn patsy? Hadn't her every gesture been calculated beforehand, her every step plotted in advance, right down to that shivering on his lap, face pressed into his neck...

But—

No: it was a classic *Magus* case, straight out of John Fowles. Right from the very beginning she'd been putting him on with her sweet twofacedness, her ducks-and-titters and *tee hee hees*—

—could you *fake* a blush?

Well...

Like Miniver Cheevy, he thought and thought and kept on thinking; coughed and cursed and called it fate, and kept on drinking. Like Egbert Soufflé, he drank alone a lot that bleak dehydrated summer.

What about Abby/Ann's advice? Forget it; the funny-farmers needn't institutionalize him just yet. He did accept a prescription of little yellow pills, handy for deadening the senses. And the appetites: off came his Lumpy Humpty Dumpty weight, twenty pounds by Labor Day, thirty more by New Year's.

The pointless nature of It All. First one, then a couple. Initial promise of joy followed by grief and pain. The best-laid schemes, the best-schemed lays resulting in hearts broken, spindled, shredded, mulched. So why keep struggling? Why not commit some form of suicide—if not physical, then by becoming a sapphophobe, a misogynist, an insulated all-around misanthrope?

But even that was denied him.

His folks's estate not yet settled, the Cheval still a year off, he had to escape from haunted Saturn Street "straight into Uranus," a crackerbox walkup by the Interstate onramp. One sweltering August night he was packing his books in soggy cartons while listening to "She's Got Bette Davis Eyes" for the umpty-umphth time, when suddenly there came a scratching—

—Who's that?

—Please. Is Joyce there?

—*No!* Go away.

—Please. Is Joyce there?

—NO!! Go away!

And they might have kept that up for quite a long time had Peyton not wrenched the door open and found Young Shirley Jones, looking wholesome-buttery beautiful and heartbroken.

Joyce had disappeared from their place. No word, no note, money missing. Shirley had searched everywhere, asked everyone else, found not a clue.

—Join the club.

—No, she talked about that—about you—

—I'll *bet* she did.

—No no, no really, I think—I mean—she felt—about what she said—when she thought about it—she got so... that's one reason I was hoping... she might've come back here... to you.

—Oh.

All things considered, it didn't much matter whether Joyce had ever loved him, or Young Shirley either—in a way that would be far worse, her loving either or both of them, and they unable to save her from her jitters and restlessness and insecurity; from living in dread of what the darkness hides.

We can't be responsible for that.

But if only they'd shown more patience, taken more upon themselves, maybe...

Peyton retrieved a bottle from a soggy halfpacked carton and he and Shirley shared it, hand to hand, sitting shoulder to shoulder on the carpet in that accursed hot apartment, mourning together.

It was very late and very dark when the bottle got emptied, but they continued to avert faces from each other as they wiped the moisture from their eyes. She offered him the air conditioner back; he said no, you might as well keep it; she handed him a scrap with her number, asking him please to call if he ever heard anything. He never did; so he never had.

And that was the last time he'd been that close to a woman, to another human being, to anybody, till a couple of years later when Skeeter Kitefly came skating out of nowhere to sweep him off his feet and bloody his nose....

*

His hand was cramping badly by midday Sunday, when he looked down and found it had written a gone-into spelled-out case study of himself and the Girl of his Dreams. Against all orders: a neatly-lettered spill-of-guts in black and white. Putting it on paper was like ripping a bandage off a hairy clotted chest wound.

Or so at least it should have felt.

In fact it felt as though he'd finished taking a final exam. Maybe aced, maybe flunked, but either way done with and out from under.

(Mmph.)

(Good God.)

He considered the Significance to History of the document before him; and the Curious Person to whom it was addressed.

It appears I have told you the story of MY hard, hard life. Which I suppose makes you my petite amie confessor. Or confessress. Or confessrix—take your pick.

I'm sorry I hung up on you.

I hope it didn't hurt your feelings (or your ear).

I never meant to give your grief.

I hope you will forgive me and forget it.

I haven't done very well by women in my life so far, but I want to start doing better.

I want to do better by you. More than simply "listening" and "paying attention"—as if my being all ears (except for the rest of me) could have lent some sort of meaning to Life.

Perhaps the true meaning or purpose of Life is to FIND a meaning or purpose for our lives.

Each other's, if not our own.

In the meantime, I would like to go on paying attention to you.

Yours,

Peyton Derente

P.S. Did I ever tell you how much I love the way you talk?

(So much. So much.)

*

He stuffed this into a manila envelope, slapped on all the stamps he could find, and mailed it off to Wheeville first thing Monday morning. It would presumably arrive the next day, and Skeeter being a fast reader and quick study she'd probably react right away; so after giving his Tuesday exams he ran home and sat by the phone all afternoon, all evening, all night, into the next AM...

Letter delayed by the Christmas rush, of course. Annoying but understandable. And then there was that plumb-zero windchill, too; postmen freezing to mailboxes, letters trapped in ice floes...

Wednesday—today—it was so cold he had to put on longjohns, a thermal sweater, two pairs of socks, and a ski mask (to save his nose from frostbite) before he could head out to wrap up finals and resume papergrading at the Old Library. Moving to Dr. Ecklebury's office as the day dragged crudily on. Seeing dismal images of Skeeter in tears, Skeeter in dives, Skeeter with bottles and razors and ropes, Clarence the Dodge Dart broken down on lonely roads, buried in snowdrifts so there would never be a response to his confession, never a word or a look or a touch again from that miniature maniac, his antic cutiepie...

At least in here he wouldn't have to hear his phone *not* ringing with the non-news that Snow White had told him next to nothing, and he'd botched it; whereas Rose Red had told him all in all, and *still* he'd botched it. And if you were looking for strike three, there was always Dream Girl and he'd snuffed her out five nights ago in a see-through can of Campbell's Soup.

All out; none safe.

However agnostic you might believe yourself to be, there were all those Calvinistic axe-grinders in your genes and maybe there *was* something to predestination: those three had been his foreordained soulmates, he had failed them all, and what possible promise of joy could ever be left to him now? What chance of being saved (for want of a better word) from what he'd coughed at and cursed at and called fate?

Damnation.

Indeed.

"THERE you are!" said a deep voice, jolting him half out of Dr. Ecklebury's chair.

Not GoFoC, though; just Tim the lummoxy intern.

"Wha'?"

"I didn't know you were in here," said Tim. "Uh—about my term paper? The one sorta due today? You know, the Art History one—"

"I am aware of the subject. And that it's due today. So where is it?"

Tim held out a single slip of pink paper.

"Kind of short, don't you think?" Peyton said, glancing at it: WHILE YOU WERE OUT.

“Oh, that’s just a message. My paper, well, it’s not quite ready to turn in yet—it’s all written, pretty much, but not typed—see, I was gonna use my roommate’s girlfriend’s typewriter last night? But it sorta broke, and I know you said you wouldn’t take our papers late ‘even if the moon fell outta the sky’ but I could have it for you tomorrow, all written and typed and everything, I promise—”

Peyton cramming halfgraded exams into his briefcase, struggling into his coat and scarf and skimask: “It’d better be so good it’s flabbergasting, Tim, when it *is* ready tomorrow and in my box by 5 PM *at the latest*.”

“Hey, thanks, man! I owe you one!”

“We’ll call it a draw,” said Peyton as he pounded away down the Old Library’s rattletrap stairs, out the door and through the cold West Quad, past Brecknock Hall and Haller Hall, the Amphitheater, the New Library, the Book & Supply Store; skidding on patches of ice around the frozen pond as he ran to the Student Union. In through its double doors, down another staircase, around a corner and into a Game Room pretty much deserted—

—except for a pint-sized young woman in a fire-engine-red UWSM sweatshirt, its hood too small to contain a great whomp of hair the color and fuzziness of a prime-time peach. Her back was to him as she played Ms. Pac-Man, whanging at the joystick with many *unnnnhs* and *grrrrs* and cries of self-encouragement, cheering herself on—

—as Peyton paused for breath, peeling off his skimask, feeling his heart try to force itself out of his mouth. Watching her with a trace of wonder that anyone so short could loom so large in a person’s life.

As if he could ever have simply put her out of his mind; forgotten anything she might be likely to think or feel or say or do. Quite a woman, Little Fan.

He came up behind her and said hello.

She let out a high-pitched shriek, whirled around: “*Jesus to pieces, Peyton!*”

“Sorry. I got your message... I take it you got my letter?”

“Maybe,” she gasped, one hand clutching her chest.

“Well then,” he said.

She reached out her other hand, caught hold of his elbow, clasped it with an expression of nettled forbearance. She, too, pausing for breath.

“Ah...” said Peyton. “So... what do you *think?*”

And try as she might to keep it back, to smooth it out, she couldn't prevent the horizontal fissure from spreading across her face, the splitkicking grin from shining forth. No way to hide the light or cap the gladsome spirit: let nothing you dismay.

He took her fine-boned hand off his elbow and raised it to his lips.

“(Shniff)” went Skeeter, after awhile, as he kept her knuckles pressed to his nostrils. “Well, if you think I'm never going to wash this hand again... (shniff) ...I guess I'll overlook your incivility, *this* time... (shniff) ...isn't that a great word? 'Incivility'—like a snail when it crawls out of its shell. You see I'm ready to tackle Biology... (shniff) ...are you only going to kiss my hand? There's lots more of me, you know—”

“I think,” said Peyton into her ear after a much longer while, “you might just possibly be able to bluff your way through it.”

“Through what?” (Smooch.) “Biology?” (Smooch.) “Or kissing?”

“Social work. Talking leapers off ledges, and things like that. Being a surrogate Wendy to wayward Lost Boys.”

“That's right—there's more than one way of growing up! (Cackle.) Or I could play BoogaBloo Angel to Pinocchios.” She let go of his neck, tweaked his nose, and slid down to land on her feet. “I've got so much to tell you, it's like I haven't seen you for months—c'mon!”

“Where to?”

“Why, anywhere, Pooh Bear—out to dinner—out to lunch—out to smooch my honeybunch.”

Putting on her own coat, earmuffs, mittens, a stocking cap instead of the too-small hood; describing a Cabbage Patch Doll riot she'd taken part in at Run-o'-the-Mall; gloating over a secret present she'd gotten him for Christmas—no, not razzleberry dressing, but Peyton would love it and she would have to kill him if he didn't; grabbing him by the glove and yanking him up the stairs.

“I swear, what a year this has been—I began it fed up with school and men and myself and everything, ‘n’ getta loada me now! Oh—RoBynne says hi.”

“Mmph?”

“Please don’t be mad but I told her some of what you wrote in your letter and she says she’s willing to forgive you if you’ll crawl on your hands and knees and plead with her a little first.”

“Exciting prospect.”

They went out into the December twilight, the full-blast fury of the whistling windchill—

“It is so COLD!” Skeeter yelled, fumbling off her big round glasses. “On the way over here these fogged up and then *froze over*—lemme just tuck ‘em in my poke—okay! Now, warm me up—”

She buried her face in Peyton’s coatfront, burrowing deep into his embrace, digging on down with abruptly-pointed chin till nothing facial was left visible except a peeking-upward de-glassed gaze.

Candles in the wind? Not these magic campfires, perfectly round, perfectly clear, piercing the gloom like baby-blue M&M’s set ablaze by some confectionery pyrotechnic. Ah yes: the eyes again. The eyes again.