

Fabulous at Fifty
a novel by
Rafael Yglesias



Stage Two

2.1

As the first anniversary of Amy's death neared, Hugh decided to honor Jewish tradition by unveiling her headstone. Ruth told him she and Bernie preferred not to use a rabbi for this ceremony, limiting it to the Kaddish prayer and whatever her loved ones wanted to say. To prepare his remarks, he went deep into the master bedroom's walk-in closet to explore the box of childhood keepsakes that years ago Ruth had packed up for Amy to have.

He carried it into their bedroom and found the sealing tape already cut. Amy must have neglected to reseal it after she inspected what Ruth had chosen to send. Inside he found photos, two sets in small albums and the others loose, a chronology of Amy growing up: as cherubic baby; as impish girl dressed like a cowboy, complete with toy gun and holster, boots and spurs; as cheerful chubby camp counselor-in-training; and last as a solemn, slightly worried high school senior, a little too skinny, her auburn hair so ungoverned it almost covered her face. Beneath the pictures he spied a packet of letters in her rounded, neat handwriting from camp and college and read a few. They had a touch of formality, the frustrated writer struggling to find a voice that was at once casual and fulsome. Beneath the packet, tucked away at the very bottom—he almost didn't reach for it—was a notebook.

Its padded cover had a floral design. The pages were light green and faintly lined, the edges becoming brittle with age. The opening sentence was “I just finished moving into my freshman dorm.”

Seeing each entry had been dated, Hugh’s heart began to beat fast. He flipped to the end and confirmed that this notebook covered all of her college days, which meant he would find accounts of when they first met, his courtship, and their decision to marry in senior year.

There were several tearful pleasures he discovered in these entries, including the surprise that right away Amy had thought him “very cute, in a preppy way, especially his chiseled chin and the dimple that appears in his left cheek when he smiles . . .” She loved his “passion for movies, which makes him talk like a professor . . .” He also discovered a jealousy he didn’t know he should have had, of a would-be poet and classics major, Bill Zwick, whom he remembered vaguely always smoking Gauloises and tossing off his shoulder a mass of straight black hair that fell halfway down his back. She gushed about Z’s lanky frame, moody eyes, and, most shocking of all: “Z is so good with his long fingers my bones feel like they’re melting. He’s a very experienced lover . . .” Hugh wasn’t surprised, but it was painful, that once Zwick without explanation disappeared from the diary, and lucky Hugh became the only man in its pages, he found no mention of lovemaking other than the fact of it.

He forgave her, or rather the past, for that slight and continued on to find the entry reacting to his marriage proposal in senior year.

*It’s so fucking crazy to marry this young when all my
friends are vowing never to get married. It’s not only a*

stupid, stupid bourgeois convention, I think marriage stopped my mom from staying a teacher and that's made her a little crazy. But I don't have to give up my writing. Anyway, that's not what I'm really worried about. I'm worried about taking Hughie on full time. He's so sweet, but he's sweet like a child and when I met his parents I found out why. His mother is an ice cube tray. She treats him like a stray puppy she's longing to give to the ASPCA. She even corrects the way he eats. You can practically see the newspaper in her hand hitting him on his snout. And his father acts like an older brother to H., like he's someone he wants to beat up. He bragged to me that Hugh still couldn't beat him at tennis! Anyway it solves the mystery of why Hughie never seems to know what he's feeling. His parents obviously didn't want him, don't like being parents, so they don't want him to feel anything cause it's so goddamn inconvenient. He's like a character out of Franny and Zooey. That's why I always have to explain to him why he gets sad and feels like crying for what he thinks is no reason, when it seems so obvious, or why he can't be alone for too long, or why he keeps doing what his friends want even if it bores him, and it's so

fucking clear now. His parents aren't parents. He's a child. Can I marry a child? Should I?

That brought him to the bottom of the page. He felt his jaw ache, sore these days from what his dentist claimed was night-grinding, and throbbing now with anger at Amy. This was an old quarrel, what he thought of as her Jewish view of his parents, a tribal misunderstanding. Of course his parents loved him in their critical, WASPy way. They hadn't had any other children; naturally he bore the brunt of all their criticism. Amy had a brother for her parents to snipe at. Amy even complained that Ruth was never satisfied with her homemaking or mothering of Ginnie and Ray. Long ago Hugh and she had agreed to disagree about his parents. Right: long ago. He was merely reading her first impression.

He flipped the page. "But," she wrote, "but but but I love his tenderness, his need, and I don't mind, I really don't mind having to tell him what's in his heart. He won't need much mothering. In my arms, he'll grow up fast."

He covered his face trying to stop them, those same tears Amy claimed would come upon him without his understanding. Only now he did understand. She was right. She had been the mother he never had, the love that, rather than shame and thwart him, had made him a man. She had been his family.

Two weeks after the unveiling, twelve months after Amy's death, Hugh decided his year of avoiding dating was over. Since Hilda he had remained chaste in his grief and it was time for both sorrow and horniness to be relieved. And he certainly wasn't going to repeat the mistake he had made, and regretted, with Hilda: hurting a woman by keeping his heart shuttered while she opened hers.

That night Hugh told Leslie, "I'm ready to start dating."

"Great news," she said, bluffing excitement; her hollow intonation suggested worry. "Who?" she asked and immediately corrected herself: "I have names for you. People have been submitting prospects to me for months." She penitently bowed her helmet of straight brown hair, lately dyed with a reddish tint, bringing its color nearer to her lost friend's shade.

"People have been submitting names to you?"

Leslie turned to look him full in the face. They had met post-work for dinner, a regular occurrence since Amy's death, sitting side by side in a booth at the Knickerbocker. Guillermo was touring in Italy and France. Leslie's big brown puppy dog eyes, the one arresting feature in an otherwise pleasant face, held his much longer than usual; they had a tendency to dart away bashfully when confronted. Now they stayed and looked forlorn, as if she were saying goodbye forever. "You are a hot ticket, my friend. I'll go through the list. You have to choose. I can't pick someone for you, that's for sure." She returned her attention to her plate. "I'm going to miss you when these ladies take you away."

I'm in love with her, Hugh thought. It was a shocking truth that had never made its presence felt before, at least not consciously; a painful discovery because it included the inescapable fact that he could never have her.

"Okay," she said to the last of her second Perfect Manhattan. "Boy, am I drunk. If you ask me Margery Collins would be first on my list. You know who I'm talking about, right?"

"Sure, the writer? She's famous."

“She’s brilliant and not at all full of herself. We were both at Hunter, although I didn’t know her well until after we graduated. She used to work at *Time* magazine but left to write a book. And did. She’s published three. All pretty successful, especially her bio of Alice Roosevelt that was made into . . . what was the movie called?”

“*The Princess of DC*,” Hugh said. “Wasn’t that the book’s title?”

“I think she just called it *Alice Roosevelt*. Don’t remember. I’m going senile. You’ve heard me talk about Margs a lot, right? She’s one of the people in that regular lunch I have with women who were in my class at Hunter. Since the school had no spirit we started meeting once a month a million years ago . . .” Leslie was addressing her drink, her plate, the Hirschfield drawings on the Knickbocker’s dark walls, anything but him.

He was glad her big brown eyes were avoiding his. Otherwise he might kiss her and hang on for dear life. He moved to neutral ground. “Sure, you’ve talked about those lunches a lot. Wasn’t the whole group at your fiftieth birthday?”

“Yeah, exactly, they were all there. Remember Margery? Very slim and pretty, has beautiful skin, no lines, and looks twenty years younger than she is, only when she was in her late twenties she let her hair go gray. It’s pure white, very straight, very striking against her black eyebrows, dramatic, really lovely. I was furious at her twenty years ago. Now I think, what a lot of time I waste on my hair. And for what? I’m an old lady. Margs’ natural gray hair looks great. Of course she doesn’t have my wrinkles.” Leslie put a hand on her throat and pulled her skin tight. “Time to have this done.”

“You’re beautiful. Don’t be silly. You look twenty years younger than you are. At least!” he added hastily in case that wasn’t a sufficiently flattering age regression.

“Margery’s really lovely, very, very smart, wonderful mother, one of my favorite people who I don’t get to see enough of. Did you read her book?”

“You know illiterate me. Just saw the movie.”

“Her husband, you know the famous Jim Wilson, was much older, almost thirty years older than she, a world-beater but still, much older. Was her boss at *Time* briefly before he got some chair at Columbia. It was one of those young woman-older man crushes that I think maybe she was too proud to admit later was a mistake. They have a sweet son—just graduating college—I shouldn’t say that,” Leslie added, interrupting herself.

“The son is a secret? Or his graduation from college?”

“You’re funny. Have I ever told you you’re funny? No, I mean I shouldn’t have made it sound like she didn’t love Jim. She never said anything like that to me. Quite the opposite. To everybody’s amazement she talked about him as if he were the most devastatingly handsome and charming man, which, to be honest . . .” Leslie made a face. “Nice looking guy before decrepitude set in, but devastating? Also, smart, sure, and successful, but charming? Terminally smug and sort of grumpy, I always thought. Anyway, Margs always talked and acted as if he were the cat’s meow.”

Hugh was losing interest. He doubted he could measure up to either charm or smugness. The search for love suddenly seemed exhausting, especially now that he knew he was sitting beside the woman he wanted. “When did he die?” he asked.

“Who?” At last Leslie looked at him. The puppy dog eyes were no longer sad, merely curious. Perhaps he had only imagined she felt possessive.

“Margery’s husband. Jim, you said? When did—”

She laughed, a lovely relaxed sound from a gal who usually seemed worried and harried. “Jim’s not dead! He left her for a thirty-year-old graduate student. Can you believe it? He’s in his eighties! I guess Jim’s expiration date on us ladies is fifty. ‘Time for a new squeeze.’” She sat up abruptly. “Oh! I forgot. I have a favor to ask you. Our cleaning lady is leaving us. Can you believe it? Her daughter is moving somewhere way the hell out in New Jersey and she’s moving in to help with the grandkids. Does Olga have any free days? I’d love two but I’ll take one, beggars can’t be choosers. The boys are just a disaster no matter how many times I yell at them to pick up towels, underpants, video game controllers.”

“Okay, but . . .” Hugh hesitated to agree. Olga’s incompetence had been a running joke in his household. Ray was amused by her consistently putting his clothes in his sister’s drawers and vice versa, commenting that she obviously wanted them to be cross-dressers. Ginnie was amazed that no matter how many Post-Its she stuck on her papers and books warning Olga not to, Olga went ahead and moved everything while dusting. Amy often wistfully said, “Poor Olga’s a dolt. If we fire her she’ll starve.” And Hugh remembered Ray commenting, “If everyone who’s a dolt was fired half the country would be unemployed.” Olga was a legacy of his life with Amy, especially the years of her illness. She had seemed as heartbroken as anyone during Amy’s struggle and decline. She did her job ineptly but with discretion, helping with emergency cleanups others might have balked at. Since Ray’s departure for Brown, and especially because he was staying with Mai in Providence for the summer while she worked as an intern for a Legal Aid lawyer, Hugh no longer needed her twice a week but hadn’t had the heart to reduce her days. It astonished him that with only him messing up a small corner of the

apartment, it seemed dustier and more disorganized than ever, and Olga, perhaps out of grief, seemed to make more mistakes.

“But what? Don’t tell me you don’t want to share?” Leslie struck a pose of matronly hurt—hand on bosom, dignified pout.

“Leslie, you’re welcome to Olga but you remember Amy used to complain that Olga just moved the dust around, and Ray and Ginnie always thought she was a joke, putting the wrong clothes in their closets when it should be obvious who is the six-foot-two boy and who the petite girl.”

“I’m not as fussy as Amy.” Leslie’s familiar, soothing hand stroked his forearm; it was such a pleasure to be touched with easy familiar affection. “And Margery Collins? Should I give you her email or phone number or . . .” She hesitated and asked gently, “Maybe she’s not intriguing? Just because *I* would date Margs in a flash doesn’t mean you’d like to. Should I go to number two on my list?”

“You have them ranked?”

“Sort of. A top five anyway. After that I don’t really know them, just names people toss at me when they hear I know of an available man who isn’t psychotic.” She shook her head. “I gotta say, for gals our age it sounds pretty scary out there. So you have your pick. Should I go deeper into the list?”

It was amazing to Hugh that should he reject this accomplished woman without having met her, for his hubris he would be rewarded with more names. He stared off considering her details. A gray-haired woman dumped by her doddering husband seemed safe. On the other hand it would be devastating to be judged less exciting than an

octogenarian. But what choice did he have? Leslie was beyond his reach. Hugh sighed, sounding and feeling doomed. “When you get home shoot me her email address.”

2.2

Corresponding with Margery Collins, Hugh immediately felt incompetent. Her response to his introductory email seemed as elegant as haiku.

Dear Hugh: Thanks for your charming note and the wise caution of your invitation. Leslie raves about you and she is never wrong. Would be pleased to have coffee (or something stronger) next Tuesday at venue of your choosing, anytime after four. — Margs

He discovered she was a lively and skilled writer after buying a paperback of her Alice Roosevelt biography. He also learned it had been nominated for a National Book Award and short-listed for the Pulitzer. James Robert Wilson, her unfaithful husband, was even more intimidating. He was a jack of all trades and a master too: champion squash player at Yale, top news editor at *Time* through the seventies and eighties, two-time crew member in the America's Cup, host of an award-winning PBS documentary series on neuroscience, longtime occupant of the Allingworth Chair at Columbia as a Distinguished Professor of Foreign Policy, author of the bestselling World War II spy trilogy *Golden Acorns*, and a world-class Scrabble player. According to his amazingly

long Wikipedia entry he was fluent in Russian, German, French, and, presumably, English.

The couple's pedigrees threatened to render Hugh speechless for the hour he set aside to meet Margery. From her email's aside about something stronger he assumed she preferred not to meet in a Village café. Despite his intention to write a brief and pithy reply, he composed a long-winded, dithering email suggesting they meet at five-thirty for a drink at the Gotham, unless she preferred somewhere else or a different hour, except for lunch and not later than . . .

Margery's entire response: "H – Brilliant! – M."

His shaky self-confidence collapsed when he didn't recognize Margery from her author photo. The slim, blue-eyed woman in a sleeveless gray silk dress who approached the two stools he had commandeered at the quiet end of the bar and asked, tentatively, "Hugh?" didn't have a single strand of gray hair. She had flowing, blown-out sandy locks.

He stammered hello while trying to extricate himself from the Gotham's stool and offer a hand, managing to accomplish neither satisfactorily.

Slapping down a glittering black purse on the bar as if placing a bet, inserting a black high heel shoe into the neighboring stool's first rung, and boosting herself up gracefully beside him, Margery didn't notice Hugh's hand. "I abandoned my honest white head," she explained without being asked. "Haven't confessed to Leslie that I finally gave in to middle-aged vanity. Pure stubbornness. My hair went gray at twenty-five, I decided not to dye it, that became my trademark, as it were—I'm hardly a can of Coke—and then I was too proud to admit there's a difference between premature gray

and mature gray.” She exhaled. “Hello. Nice to meet you finally. You are Leslie’s favorite human being, outside of Guillermo and her boys, of course. I’m quite jealous. Leslie is the kindest, most thoughtful person I’ve ever heard of, not to say met. My ambition was to be her favorite person and you’ve beat me out.”

As he had feared Hugh was made mute by her power of speech. He did perceive she was very nervous and trying to impress him but that didn’t change the fact that he wasn’t nimble enough for her wit. He felt as if he had been given a “fun” opportunity to rally with Serena Williams and he was responding by standing still.

“Leslie feels sorry for me,” Hugh said. While contemplating how sad he felt that his feelings for Leslie were hopeless, he had also wondered why she was so affectionate to him, more affectionate than if he were merely a friend. Taking into account her tall, dark, handsome husband, he had decided pity was the likely explanation.

A hovering bartender asked Margery, “May I get you something?”

“Vodka martini?” she wondered.

“We have them,” the bartender said. He was returning Serena’s backhand better than Hugh. “Belvedere? Gray Goose? Ketel One?”

“I don’t know. I never have cocktails, only white wine,” she said, adding, “I swear!” as if the bartender had disputed this. “Whatever you recommend,” she told him and then asked Hugh, “Do you have a signature drink? My son, who knows these things, tells me I should.”

“You mean like shaken, not stirred?”

“Precisely.”

“I don’t mean it to be a signature but I always have”—Hugh turned to the bartender—“Chivas, rocks, a splash of tap water.”

“That’s a drink worthy of Sean Connery,” Margery said. She was a pretty version of a male Kennedy: widow’s peak, wide brow, almost predatory nose. Despite Leslie’s claims about her beautiful skin, he’d expected at least a few freckles and the crinkles of their age group, but if she had them she’d hidden them with enough cover up to rival Broadway. The overall effect, dressed up and ready to party, was the opposite of her unadorned book jacket photo. In that portrait there wasn’t a touch of sexy glamour: hair white, no makeup, regretful smile, bulky wool sweater. “Of course Leslie is heartbroken about losing Amy, and is sad for you and your children, but she had a high opinion of you long before all that. I was very sorry when I heard about Amy. She edited a novel by a dear friend of mine, Laura Solomon, who just loved her, raved about her notes. And I remember Amy from talking with her at Leslie’s fortieth and fiftieth milestones. She was lovely, smart, kind, and very funny about working in publishing. Had the knack for being truthful about its irritations without a trace of bitterness.”

Ambushed by this accurate description of Amy from someone who didn’t know her well, Hugh looked away and coughed into his hand, until the burning in his eyes cooled and his throat cleared. “She was . . . her authors loved her,” he managed to say.

“Sorry. I should stay off that topic. Always been my downfall. Jim says I’m like a kid who can’t stop pulling at scabs, except the scabs are on other people!” She groaned. “I should stay off the topic of Jim, too. And this will help,” she said about the arrival of her martini.

Hugh lifted his scotch. “Cheers.”

“Absolutely.” They clinked glasses.

The brief silence allowed Hugh to say what he had prepared: “I read *Alice Roosevelt* in two sittings this weekend. It’s a fascinating book. You’re a wonderful writer.” That was a good thing to tell her, Hugh knew; it also represented his true opinion.

Margery cocked her head and smiled, relishing the compliment. “That’s very sweet of you. To take the trouble to look at my book before you meet me, exactly the kind of thoughtful gesture Leslie warned me—I mean, raved to me about you. Usually people make do with a non-specific ‘I admire your work.’”

“I wasn’t being thoughtful . . . I really, really enjoyed it. I’m terrible about reading. With all the movies I see I kid myself I’m cultured. For example, of course I saw the movie they made of your book and I was deluding myself that—”

“I loved the movie! Don’t say anything bad about it or I’ll cry,” she said, looking very merry.

“Oh, I liked the movie,” Hugh fibbed. There were things about it he’d liked, but there were moments in almost every movie he had ever seen that he liked. The filmmakers had aimed dead center at the middlebrow tastes of the Oscar voters: a script jammed with good-hearted politics, its characters learning important lessons; almost every scene designed to show off a hammy give-me-an-award-please performance by Mary Winston; the cinematographer and director approaching their jobs as if Cinemascope and Technicolor had just been invented. Montage too. The filmmakers’ strategy was a partial success. They did receive dutiful Oscar nominations for the big reputations—Mary Winston, the director, the writer, and the cinematographer—but the

picture lost in all categories to up-and-coming talent whose performances, direction, writing, and photography were bolder and more original. The box office gross was disappointing, the reviews polite. Hugh was surprised Margery was so happy about it. The movie had nothing of the sensibility of her book's tart narrative, had replaced her subtle and complicated depiction of the frustrations of female ambition and sexuality in that repressed society with a timid and superficial feminism. Seeing the movie you might have assumed the book was as bland as a Landmark history. "I'm glad to hear you were happy with it. Authors often—"

"I loved it!" Margery repeated emphatically. "Mary was just amazing. I still can't believe she didn't get the Oscar, that they gave it to that year's pretty young thing."

"You mean Hilary Swank?" Hugh wondered aloud at hearing her gritty performance in *Million Dollar Baby* described as pretty.

"New kid on the block syndrome. Mary has her Oscar and she's getting close to forty so they're ready to ignore her until she's an eminence. But this was one of her best. Mary was stunning as Alice, a complete transformation; I couldn't believe how lucky I was. And I was thrilled by the experience of being on set. Bob pretended he needed me around to consult for authenticity—insisted I stay for the whole shoot! Ended my marriage, but that's a blessing in disguise. You're probably terribly bored with the magic of movie-making but for me it was like running away and joining the circus. I had this marvelous, talented family, all of them working like crazy to make my book into a great film."

Hollywood, Hugh could hear Ethel Merman sing, *where you're terrific when you're merely good*. He nodded, submerged into a long sip of his Chivas, and surfaced to ask, "Are you working on a new book?"

"You know I was kidding," she said, laying a hand, nails dark red, on his forearm. "You can tell me if you didn't care for the movie. In fact, since you're an expert, unlike hearing what most people thought of *Princess*, your frank opinion interests me enormously. Open fire." She left her hand there and gazed into his eyes. Her look and touch were intimate and unsettling.

He averted his gaze to the mirror behind the bar. Better to observe her reaction once removed. "The movie was good, very effective at what it wanted to achieve," Hugh lied to their reflections. "But after reading your book I feel they aimed low. Your Alice is a complicated woman, fighting the time she's living in and also longing for its approval. There's her conflict with the world's sexism in your biography, and there's also the conflict within herself for her father's respect. The movie doesn't convey how those two interact and complicate her feelings. Doesn't do justice to the psychological insights of your book."

"What a relief." She patted his hand, bringing his eyes back to her. Her touch and penetrating stare weren't sexual, rather relentlessly intrusive, as if she were boring into his consciousness to take up permanent residence. She fascinated him and he wanted her to back off. "To talk with someone who really knows movie-making and can understand what I'm about to say in context. I was overwhelmed by the excitement, the . . . you know, summer camp, high school intimacy, and hierarchies of the set. And, of course, I was star-struck. Mary is charming, smart—not as smart as she thinks she is, but bright

and, of course, insanely charismatic. She could be anything she wants, even President, maybe especially President. I said to her she should consider becoming the Democratic Reagan. Revive true liberalism in the U.S. And Bob Tillinger, my director . . .” Margs released Hugh’s arm at last and brought her hand to her throat. “I fell in love. Not with Bob the man, but the thrill of having a collaborator, because by then he had barred Gail Redmond, the screenwriter, from the set and was relying on me for the many, many dialogue fixes. I begged Bob to let me also fix Gail’s dreadful oversimplifications of Alice’s character but he just wanted me to make their speech authentic, was scared, terrified really, to trust that the audience would . . .”

Other than pausing to acknowledge Hugh’s occasional *yeses*, *of courses*, and *I sees*, Margery talked until their drinks were emptied and seconds were ordered and half-emptied. The gist was that she was responsible for everything good in *The Princess of DC* and everyone else was responsible for what Hugh had correctly identified as weak. She was on the editing phase of the movie when she glanced at her watch in mid-sentence and exclaimed, “Oh my God, I have to run, I’m meeting an old friend to see the new Martin McDonagh play. I hate his work but I can’t tell my friends or they’ll write me off as hopelessly middlebrow.” She opened her purse.

“I’ve got this,” Hugh assured her.

“This is so embarrassing. I talked about nothing but myself.” Margery stood and offered an ingratiating smile and glistening eyes. “You have to let me take you to dinner and I promise I’ll shut up and hear all about what you’re up to. Promise you won’t hold my egomaniacal fit against me and we’ll do this again? Please, Hugh?”

He wanted to say, “You’re too much for me, too smart, too big a personality, too interested in success, too alive.” He said, “Sure.”

“Thank you!” She kissed him on the cheek briskly, angled to move off, but paused to say: “I’m so, so sorry I monopolized, but it’s really your fault. Once you got me on the subject, I couldn’t help it. What can I say?” She grinned. “I love making movies!”

2.3

“Hugh, you poor baby, she’s impossible. I had no idea how bad.” Leslie was breathless. She had called Hugh during her half hour on the elliptical before a salad at her home-office desk and a rush back to her law firm to vet contracts for the plentiful deals booming in New York real estate. He assumed she wanted a report on his drink with Margery, but before he made the mistake of answering that Margery did seem self-absorbed, luckily Leslie made it clear whom she was complaining about. “Olga must be one of the thickest women I’ve ever met. I don’t know how she made the mistake of putting king-size sheets on Rafa’s bed in the first place—it’s a full after all, not even a queen—but she did it again! And, please tell, how does she mistake a twelve-year-old boy’s T-shirts for a fifty-year-old man’s? I love you, Hugh, and thanks”—he heard a gasp as the whirring noise in the background slowed and stopped—“for loaning her but I have to find someone else or Rafa said he’s going to run away from home.” Another gasping inhale. “She put a rubber band around his Magic: The Gathering cards and stowed them in a drawer under a pile of graphic novels!”

“I’m sorry,” Hugh said. “I tried to warn you. Don’t you remember how Amy quipped that although Olga’s heart is always full, she’s got an empty brain—”

“Okay, that’s my question. You know Amy was my dearest friend and we both loved her, but what the hell was she thinking keeping Olga?”

“Amy would say, ‘Olga needs this job.’ She just couldn’t bear to fire her.”

“Amy couldn’t bear to fire her? Amy was a rock, always there when you needed her, but she wasn’t soft-hearted. She was tougher on me than any of my other friends, and she was not soft when it came to you either, and you’re a model husband. And boy did she crack the whip with Ginnie and Ray—”

“She wasn’t tough with strangers. And certainly not someone she was employing,” Hugh corrected Leslie. “She told me that if we didn’t give Olga work she would starve to death.”

“Huh. I didn’t know that about my Aim. That’s so interesting.”

“And then Olga was very, very kind and sweet once Amy got ill, very thoughtful about us changing her hours and the extra work, never complaining—”

“OF COURSE,” Leslie shouted over him and agonized, “I’m horrible, horrible. Olga is very sweet. She means well, but . . . Jesus! I didn’t get a wink of sleep and my desk looks like a hurricane hit it. The Gordon brothers are going to have a shit fit if I don’t— Oh! They’re buying that commercial building next to yours. It’s their third deal contiguously on the block and they’re talking about tearing them all down and putting up a condo. Make your place much more valuable.”

“But I don’t own,” Hugh reminded her. “I’m a lowly renter.”

“I know! And when your rent hits the twenty-five-hundred a month threshold in two years you won’t be rent-stabilized anymore.”

“Don’t remind me!” Hugh was in deep denial about this coming economic catastrophe. He would have to move.

“After that, they can raise you to market rate. Hugh, honey, that’s probably gonna be seven, eight, maybe nine thousand a month.”

“Jesus,” he mumbled. “Really?”

“Really. That’s why I begged you guys to buy into my building when prices were cheap.”

“We didn’t have the money to buy. We didn’t when things were cheap, we didn’t when things were reasonable, and we—that is, I—definitely don’t now that things are insane.” He cut himself off. “What can I say? Your friend is poor.”

“You’re the richest man I know,” Leslie said. “Everyone loves you, and your children are fantastic. And the Gordon project will class up your whole block.”

“And that will help me how? I’ll have to pay more for milk at D’Agostino’s.”

“I guess it doesn’t. I don’t know what I’m saying. I’m going to lose all my clients if I don’t get some sleep and clear my desk. I’ve got to hang up—but wait, wait! How did it go with Margery? Full disclosure: I know it went great for her. She wrote to thank me, said you were utterly charming. You read her book! What a good boy. She was very impressed. A true gentleman, that’s you.” At last Leslie came to a full, panting stop. And waited for an answer.

What to say? He longed to ask her how she could have described Margery as a woman who wasn’t full of herself. “Well, of course she was brilliant, fascinating. And lovely. By the way, she’s dyed her hair—”

“I know! She confessed. I’m so relieved she’s joined the hopeless fight against aging. She always made me feel trivial and superficial, which is exactly what— Oh! Rafa’s texting me. Gotta go. I’ll call on my way home for a full report. Bye.”

When Hugh got home from work he showed off his new real estate savvy to Joe the doorman, announcing that the building next door was being bought by the Gordons.

But no one could get the drop on Joe. “Yep. Heard,” he said, nodding sagely, leaning on the awning’s brass pole. Joe was a hundred pounds overweight; he took every opportunity to prop himself up. “And we’re next. Jesus, I’ll lose this job. I mean, I’ll get work, another building, and maybe after they build the new place they’ll have me back here, but you know, this is my family. I’ve watched everyone’s kids grow up, yours, the Rothmans’, Baums’, Rachlins’.” He shook his head, jowls trembling. Were those tears forming?

“How do you know we’re next?” Hugh said, irritated Joe was so eager to spread calamitous news.

“Hang on. I just remembered. I got something for you. Hand delivered.” Joe pushed off the pole and waddled into the building, where he retrieved a manila envelope. In the upper left hand corner Hugh saw the sender’s name written in a flourishing hand: Margery Collins.

“Yeah, they’re warehousing,” Joe said. “That can mean only one thing.”

“What?”

“Stein is getting ready to sell. 12G, Penthouse A, 4B, all empty. He isn’t showing ’em. Not listing ’em. In fact, he hasn’t rented a place in four months now. He’s warehousing so he can sell the building.”

“Are you sure? I heard he was planning to renovate Penthouse A.”

“Renovate for rental? You paint a rental. Sand the floors. Put in a cheap new stove. Renovate!” Joe waved a pudgy hand. “That’s a cover story. He’s seeing how fast

he can warehouse enough apartments to catch himself a buyer. Probably the Gordons. Then they'll tear down the whole block and build some goddamn monstrosity. Good for you, though. You'll make some change out of it." Joe winked. "Insider price and you flip, right?"

Hugh staggered upstairs. Could this be true? He was going to be forced out of his home in a matter of months, not even squeak out another two years? He opened the envelope absent-mindedly and was confused when a smaller linen envelope slid out, addressed to Margery Collins. A yellow sticky was attached with a note in her confident, legible hand:

Must attend for me.

Any interest in accompanying?

Should be mildly amusing. – M

It took him several seconds to figure out she had enclosed an invitation addressed to her that she meant for him to open to decide if he would be her plus one. The stiff embossed card inside the linen envelope asked for her attendance at a fundraiser for the New York Historical Society, celebrating the publication of Cyrus Milhouse's *Central Park*, a history of the Manhattan landmark from its design to the present day. He saw a blur of famous names on the invitation committee, checked for Karen, Francine, or Hilda, felt relief they weren't there, then despair that he could think of no good reason to say no. As a first real date it seemed uncomfortably public. He wanted to get to know Margery in a relaxed setting. He had reconciled Leslie's saying "She's not at all full of herself" with his impression that she was utterly self-involved by deciding that she was suffering from temporary narcissism brought on by her husband dumping her. If that guess was correct then going to an event mobbed with people who knew her as Mrs. James Robert

Wilson would only make matters worse. He certainly did not fancy the role of her I'm-okay date.

Luckily, he had a session with Roberto Salazar scheduled at five-thirty. Freshly showered and his thoughts neatly dressed, he recounted every detail of the drinks date and the Historical Society invite and concluded by asking the grief counselor whether it wouldn't be better for all concerned if he politely declined, offering instead to take her to a quiet dinner?

"If you want to give her a second chance," Salazar said, "suggesting dinner as an alternative is certainly a polite way of saying no to her invite. And saying no to women who are not Amy is your objective, right?"

"What?" There was something nasty in how Salazar put it. Reminded Hugh of his mother's way of sniping at his decisions. "I never said that."

Salazar opened his hands and said gently, "You told me you never said no to Amy and now you want to learn how to say no to any new woman who comes into your life."

"Yes, but no. You've put it in a funny way."

"Fair enough." Salazar leaned forward, as if getting down to it. "Let's forget Margery for a moment. I'm wondering why you want to learn how to say no to new women when you were happy saying yes to Amy?"

"I don't!" Hugh protested. "I want to say yes to seeing Margery again, I just don't want to go to this shindig. That's why I want to know if you think it's a good idea to ask her to a quiet dinner instead?"

Salazar shook his head and leaned back, as if he were giving up on some goal. Then he shrugged, made a rueful face and mumbled, “Sounds okay to me.” He appeared preoccupied. Doubtful? No. He was censoring himself.

“Come on, spit it out,” Hugh said. “What do you think?”

“I think talking about dating decisions with me has nothing to do with grief-counseling.”

“Oh.” Hugh considered this. “You’re wrong.”

“How so?”

“Because in this situation, when I’m deeply unsure of what to do, the person I want to ask for advice is Amy.”

“Yes, well, you’re right, you can’t ask your wife who to date.” He looked at Hugh as if that had some deeper meaning.

“Okay.” Hugh decided this was Salazar’s point. “You think I have to make up my own mind.”

“No, you can ask friends for advice. Pick one.”

“Leslie. But I can’t ask Leslie.”

Salazar made a face. “Because you have a crush on her? Or because she has a crush on you?”

“What? That? I wasn’t serious. No, it’s because she picked Margery for me. She’s biased.”

“What about Peter?”

“I love Peter but he doesn’t know what he thinks about anything until he asks Debby.”

“What about Debby then?”

“I don’t really know her.”

“And the sculptor? I can’t remember his—”

“Kyle. He thinks I should fuck everything in sight.”

Salazar grunted a laugh. “He has a point. You’re taking every step of this too seriously, overthinking everything. This is just one evening. Sounds like it’s an interesting event. You’re probably interested in the history of Central Park. At least you won’t be home alone sobbing at *Seinfeld*.”

Salazar was right. Hugh was making himself into a nervous wreck about every gesture, every word. And why not ask Leslie? They were just friends, the best of friends. On the street he opened his Nokia and hit speed dial for her cell.

“I can’t talk! Still at the office,” she answered. “Are you okay?”

This was a busy woman, a high-powered lawyer, mother of two, wife of a cult jazz pianist. He shouldn’t be bothering her about his high school dating anxieties.

“Hughie? Are you there? You okay?”

“What is warehousing apartments?”

“What? Warehousing apartments is when you let leases expire and don’t rent until you have enough empty units to convert a building to go condo, or to sell it unencumbered by leases to a buyer, so the buyer is free to do what he likes. Why? Who’s warehousing apartments?”

“Joe the doorman says Mr. Stein is warehousing apartments in my building so he can sell to your buddies, the Gordons.”

“He hasn’t approached the Gordons. So far as I know, I should add. How many apartments are sitting empty?”

“Just three.”

“For how long?”

“Joe says the first was four months ago.”

“Oh, dear. Forgoing four months of rent. So he’s serious. But only three apartments so far? Okay, you’ve got time. Plenty of time. This is not gonna happen overnight.”

“What’s not gonna happen?”

“Stein selling the building. Or converting.”

“So that wouldn’t be good for me? Joe seemed to think I could get an insider price and make some money.”

“Joe is a doorman, not a real estate lawyer. If Stein succeeds in converting to a condo he can just kick you out.”

“What if he sells the building?”

“Same thing. Anyone who buys would be buying to convert.”

“So I’m fucked?”

“You’re not safe.”

“But it’s my home,” Hugh pleaded. “My whole life is in that apartment.”

“I know, sweetie. But”—Leslie delivered this truth as gently as she could—
“when it comes to your life, even more than the rest of us mortals, you’re just renting.”

2.4

He went to the Historical Society fête. As he had feared, Margery seemed to want to display him, not be with him. He was carted from introduction to introduction. When she announced his name to each celebrity of her world she beamed at him, tugging him close as if he were her favorite stuffed animal.

The worst instance of her making him feel he was competing with her ex came after they were seated at table two, immediately below the podium where Cyrus Milhouse was introduced by the Parks Commissioner, read from his book, and answered adoring questions—one from Charlie Rose, for God’s sake. Between speakers, Margery told a bigwig from *The New York Times* that Hugh ran the Hamilton Film Festival. Hugh commented, “More like chase after it.” She kissed him on the lips—briefly, but for the first time—and called to everyone, “Hugh’s so modest!” adding pointedly, “Isn’t that refreshing? The truth is, he does a brilliant job with the city’s best film program.”

Brilliant, he feared, was what she needed him to be. And he wasn’t. More to the point, he didn’t want to be.

There had been an early telling and unsettling moment, when he picked her up in the lobby of the elegant Beresford—which was not a rental, he noted with his newly embittered consciousness of such differences. She appeared in a slinky red dress he later heard her say was a Valentino, that showed off her fit, lovely shape. Before he could say wow, she did the same and gestured appreciatively at his gray Armani. It was his one expensive suit, reserved for the festival opening night and the Foundation’s annual

fundraising gala. “You clean up nice,” she said. In the moment, he was flattered. Later he realized it implied that the outfit he had chosen for their initial drinks—black linen pants and a thin beige Italian cashmere sweater, both among the priciest garments in his closet—were, as Ruth might say, chopped liver.

It was after midnight when they finally left the event. Being on stage had exhausted him, so he agreed immediately when Margery said, in her brisk, in-charge style, “Hugh, you’ve been a real sport. Just put me in a cab and get yourself home to a well-earned night’s sleep.” She kissed him a second time, also on the lips, but faster, a passing breeze.

His mind and body were profoundly tired until he got into bed and shut his eyes. Memories lit up a slideshow: Amy laughing with him; Amy irritated at him; Amy riding her bike intently on Block Island; Amy on the tennis court, sweat glistening at the edges of her thick auburn hair; Amy carrying baby Ginnie on her hip like a gun, Amy gathering tall Ray into her shrinking body. The past was interpolated with the evening’s residue: feeling his cheeks stretch as he shook famous hands, walking arm in arm with a strange woman, standing in the Beresford waiting like an anxious sophomore on a prom date. As the gray-black at the edge of the city sky brightened, the worst memories of Amy’s illness overwhelmed the happy past, settling at last on his final view of his beloved: motionless, medical equipment disconnected, eyes vacant, mouth agape, and forever still.

He had resisted temptation for two weeks but now he wanted company, so he broke a promise he had made to Roberto Salazar that he wouldn’t bring Amy to bed with him. He tossed comforter and sheet aside and staggered to his home desk across the room. He opened the bottom filing cabinet drawer where Olga never bothered to dust,

and took from the backmost file—behind the detritus of insurance, income taxes, Amy’s employment information, a file of death certificates, condolence letters, and the deed to her grave—a four-by-six-inch dark brown folding leather frame that opened to display a triptych of photographs. The frame was meant to house family portraits, to be kept open on a desk, a piano, a credenza. He had bought it to preserve a trio of pictures of Amy.

The first was from their first year, first trip together after graduating college, a cross-country drive in his coughing VW bug. They had splurged, deciding to skip yet another night of back-aching non-rest in their sleeping bags, instead renting a room in what he kept calling the Bates Motel just outside the entrance to Canyonlands. They had enjoyed a long day of hiking, fallen deeply asleep at seven, and woken at dawn to make love, the eerie orange landscape aglow behind the thin curtain of their tiny room’s lone window. Afterward he fetched a pair of Styrofoam cups of weak complimentary coffee from the office and brought them back. He gulped his and dug out his camera while she, uncovered, leisurely sipped hers in the creaky bed, wrinkled sheets and scratchy blanket having slipped to the wood floor. She gazed contentedly as the sunlight spread across her fair, girlish skin. He pointed his Kodak, wanting to document in a permanent image the beautiful young woman he had won. He waited for her permission. Her sly smile, amused and naughty, silently agreed to the nude portrait.

The second photograph was taken ten years later, their first trip alone after the birth of Ginnie. While their four-year-old girl was fussed over by her doting grandparents in New Jersey, Hugh and Amy went to the Cannes Film Festival for a long weekend partially paid for by Hugh’s then job, unhappily writing second-string film reviews for *Newsweek*. The movies were disappointing and Hugh felt lost and disgusted

by the hucksterism, but Amy got a bang out of meeting Liam Neeson and Sigourney Weaver, and they had a great seafood meal dockside, got very drunk on two bottles of white wine, and woke at dawn miraculously free of hangovers to once again make love in the orange light of a new day's sun, this one breaking over a still Mediterranean sea. This time he brought back a better dose of caffeine, in wide, handleless mugs. Once again sheets had been kicked off the bed during their lovemaking, and while Amy sipped her *café au lait* slowly, studying the jammed harbor, Hugh fished out his point-and-shoot Olympus. There had been very slight changes in this young mother's body, a line in her wide brow, a crinkling at the eyes, breasts succumbing gracefully to gravity, stomach softer, hips more generous. These markers of time's usage made her more gorgeous, grown into confident womanhood. He waited for permission to immortalize this self-assured incarnation of his wife. She smiled, recognizing what Hugh already had, that it was an anniversary photo, then rested the bowl of coffee on her belly and nodded. Her sly look pierced the lens and could still shock Hugh with its intimacy, a gaze that made it clear this was no youthful lark, rather a display meant solely for his eyes—an image fashioned just for him.

The third photograph had been taken after almost another ten years, on another trip, this time celebrating her birthday in Paris. Amy wasn't thrilled about turning forty. She had been passed over for a promotion at Madison Square Books that she felt she had been promised; the children, now a teen and a tweener, were no longer only adorable; and she seemed a little tired of Hugh, complaining with fresh annoyance about traits he had displayed for two decades. One of these was that he never planned a trip unconnected to a film event, so he made certain nothing was scheduled during their week in Paris but

leisurely walks through the Musée d'Orsay, an afternoon at Versailles, and meals at legendary restaurants such as Le Grand Vefour and Taillevent. On the afternoon of her birthday, he snuck back to a shop on Avenue Montaigne and bought her an eight-hundred-dollar dress she had admired. At first she threatened to return it, but after a sensational late-night snack of foie gras and champagne, and another dawn of lovemaking, this one lit by a shimmering red light spreading over their expensive hotel room's view of the Seine, she agreed to keep his present. He ordered a pot of press café, hot milk, and a basket of croissants. He waited until she was on her second cup to bring out his Nikon. She smiled wanly and nodded for him to proceed. For room service she had drawn the sheets and blanket up to her chin, and he waited, staring at the covers. She shook her head. "I could let you take a picture of me naked," she said, "but then I'd have to kill you."

"You're beautiful," he promised her.

For a moment he expected her to refuse. If she did, he would quietly accept her no. The trip had cheered her up; he didn't want to spoil that. After a grim stare at the Seine she kicked off the bedspread and sheets—angrily, he feared. But once she was uncovered her face relaxed, and the slyest of all the sly nude smiles appeared. This picture was his favorite of the three. It was almost obscene now to look at her just out of her teenage years, and heartbreaking to encounter the optimistic young mother who had been robbed of seeing the full fruition of her labors. This womanly body, stressed but not exhausted, not seducing or wanting seduction, this mature woman who had in the truest sense given Hugh his life, was the sexiest Amy of all.

So Hugh broke his promise to the grief counselor. He brought these three lovely ladies back into the bed where they belonged and after a long unsatisfying night out with the beautiful people of New York at last found pleasure.

2.5

His second night out with Margery was the quiet dinner he had wanted as their first. She met him at his deliberately downscale choice of comfort pizza at John's in jeans and a men's polo shirt, showing wrinkles and freckles, the fast-talking brittle wit on hold. She apologized right away "for dragging you to that New York cluster fuck. I just couldn't face going alone and I had to. Thank you for keeping me company. You were a real sport."

"Oh, it was fascinating," Hugh lied.

Margery seemed relaxed but he felt anxious. For a while they focused on their menus, eventually deciding to get one large pie with everything but onions.

"It must have been hard," she said after they ordered, "really hard on you during Amy's long fight against cancer. I've heard what a great caretaker you were for her and your kids. Must have been so painful, so draining. And exhausting?"

"Yes, it was exhausting," he said, "but mostly sad. And divorce, that's also sad and very stressful. How is your son handling it?"

Margery paused, seeming to consider objecting to the change of subject before answering, "He's a wreck. In a rage. Unable to cry unless he's yelling." She smiled wanly and shrugged, then tried a subject change of her own. "I know Karen Watanabe a little. We were at a Women's Conference on the Arts thing in some godforsaken resort in Arizona for a weekend and hung out. Saved each other from death by PowerPoint. She's a dynamo. I liked her but it was just a weekend. How is she to work with?"

“Oh, she’s great. We’re good friends.” Hugh was about to add he was worried that Karen seemed to be exclusively focused on fundraising these days, disengaged from what she was raising money for, but thought better of being that frank with someone who seemed to know everyone. “So what’s your next book about? If you don’t mind saying. I know writers don’t really like to talk about their works in progress.”

“I do! As you know all too well I love talking about myself. But first, I insist you tell me about your work. How do you go about choosing which films you put on at the festival? Which I love, by the way. I haven’t gone every year, but when I have, I’ve loved what you picked.”

“I watch the submissions with Melissa, who works with me. We just pick what we like. And you? How do you pick your subject?”

Margery began to explain how she had come to want to do her next book, a biography of Mary Lincoln. She was fascinating about her meticulous research so far, curious, full of wonder and enthusiasm. *Here* was Leslie’s warm, modest, brilliant friend.

Unfortunately, Hugh wasn’t able to relax. He continued to behave as if he were interviewing her at a Foundation event. “Your passion,” he said, “for inhabiting the lives of others feels like the same impulse that drives movie-makers. I never realized before how much being a biographer is the same task as an actor creating a character. In your hands it becomes an art form.”

That was his fourth flattering comment during her explanation. She had smiled tolerantly through the first three. At this one she grimaced. “You’re being sweet, Hugh, but you saw what happened the last time you over-praised me. I made a fool of myself

about *Princess of DC*. I talked as if I'd made the movie all by my lonesome. I was mortified when I got home and played myself back. Truth is, they were all just being nice, keeping me involved. I had nothing to do with what made it so good. And you know, of course, why I exaggerated my contribution."

She waited, presumably for him to say why. He had no idea other than his general impression that she was insecure because she had been dumped, needed to puff herself up. "Well, getting a divorce must be very hard on the ego," he said.

"Oh! That's what you thought? No, no. It wasn't about Jimmy. I was trying to impress you, the cinéaste." She shrugged and added, "Well, I guess you're right, maybe I was so anxious about you because Jimmy knocked me for a loop."

"Dating is hard."

She laughed. "Oh my God, it's awful, isn't it? This is only my second try. Does it get easier? Or is it just easy for you? You're so comfortable in your own skin."

Wow, how had she gotten that wrong impression? At the moment he was trying to figure out what to do with his hands. Prop his chin on one? Fold them in his lap? His back ached from trying to sit up straight.

"Whoops," Margery chuckled. "Your expression tells me I got that wrong. Like Jimmy always says: 'Margs is a biographer, so she's great at knowing what dead people feel.' With the obvious implication of what I'm not great at knowing."

She wanted to talk about her ex-husband; Hugh didn't. Nevertheless, he said, "You call him Jimmy?"

"I know. Perfect reveal of his adolescent character. An eighty-year-old man who calls himself Jimmy."

“I saw a recent photo of him,” Hugh admitted, but he didn’t confess that he had been continuing to research Margery and her husband in the office that afternoon instead of reading submissions for the grant program. James Robert Wilson had a shiny bald scalp and his neck was wizened. Otherwise the wiry, fit, ruddy-cheeked man with a high forehead, refined nose and long jaw looked to be in his sixties: older than Hugh but not a generation’s worth. He was a handsome man in a way Hugh had never been. “He didn’t look eighty,” Hugh said.

“I know.” Margery leaned forward. “Let’s not talk about him. I’m with you and very glad to be only with you tonight.” Her left hand turned up: not reaching for him, but the gesture was a request. He laid his palm on hers and her fingers closed around his wrist. “It’s a lovely spring night. Your praise of the West Side esplanade made me long for a post-prandial.”

They held hands while ambling beside the restless Hudson. She was silent, happily pensive, gazing at the river. It was a relief not returning her serve. He realized how much of what he enjoyed with Amy was mutual silence, a communion with their surroundings. The body beside his—shoulder brushing against his shoulder, fingers loosely threading his fingers—had relaxed from its alert, rigid posture and no longer felt like a stranger’s; and he had stopped monitoring his arms, legs, face. Still, he didn’t feel at ease. Sex was looming, or at least a real kiss. This was their third meeting and the one thing that seemed clear about modern dating: everyone was in a hurry. Or maybe that was just New York.

When they reached the esplanade a breeze, fishy and brisk, came off the river. She shivered. He put his arm around her and they moved easily together. Before meeting

her this evening he had thought it likely this would be their last date, they were too different. Now fitting together nicely in their strides, he was excited that her personality contrasted so sharply with Amy's. Margs was full of smart talk, ambitious, passionate about her work. Amy had a razor sharp intellect, graduated Phi Beta, could do the *Times* Saturday crossword puzzle in pen in less than twenty minutes and the Sunday before Hugh's bagel was toasted, but she mostly kept her clever thoughts to herself. She underused that extraordinary brain, in Hugh's view, working in the shadow of the legendary head of Madison Square Books, Carl Shoenfeld. In college she had enthusiastically written short stories, and after graduation she attended a summer writing workshop, placed a story in a literary quarterly, got into MacDowell, considering applying for an MFA. But during the first year they lived together, while she supported herself freelance copyediting, she was unable to finish a novel to her satisfaction. Hugh had thought her draft beautifully written: thin on plot, yes, but a fully realized, sad, sweet story. She, on the other hand, thought it "second-rate and banal." She took a job at Madison Square as an assistant editor, within a year and a half was promoted to editor for her ability to repair manuscripts that were mostly a mess, and was eventually plucked by Carl to do his editing since he was too busy acquiring bestselling writers and the memoirs of ex-Presidents. Everyone in publishing knew she was the editor behind the legend, but no outsider did. That didn't bother Hugh; he believed in being a good number two, that they were crucial to every successful organization. What did trouble him was her failure to go back to her own writing. From time to time when the kids were still little he tried to encourage her to resume, and each time she frowned until finally one day she snapped, "Give me a break. I can't even think straight, much less write." He gave up for a while

after that, but when Ginnie and Ray both went off to summer camp he suggested she take advantage of the childless eight weeks to join a workshop, start another novel, a story. This time she said, “I prefer to read mediocrity than create my own,” adding a chilling look that reminded him of his mother, amazing because they in no way resembled each other. “You’re not mediocre,” he protested. And she closed the subject in an icy tone worthy of any thin-skinned WASP: “I’m satisfied by my career. Sorry you’re not.” He never brought it up again.

Margery, in contrast to Amy, had persisted through setbacks: an unpublished novel, many rejected short stories, and the disappointment of her first published book, a biography of Eleanor Roosevelt that, she had written in her website bio: “was deadly dull and only sold copies to my parents and most loyal friends.” Ambitious and insecure, eager to please and willing to argue—all traits opposite to Amy. Amy wasn’t ruffled by other people’s opinions of her, uninterested in engaging in debate. She didn’t suffer fools, gladly or otherwise. She ignored them. Margery, Hugh guessed from her book, wanted to educate every idiot who walked the earth.

The river wind became chilling, the warm June day regressing to a March night. She shivered again. “Head back?” Hugh asked and was surprised to hear himself add, “My place?”

She leaned on his shoulder, nodding shyly. Once among West Village townhouses they were protected from the Hudson’s winds. Crossing a street, she moved out from his shelter and they went back to holding hands, swinging gently over the pavement, until a stalled couple with a stroller forced them apart on Sixth Avenue.

“It’s children, isn’t it?” she said. “That’s what really changes a marriage—makes a marriage, I mean. When I married Jimmy, because of his age, because he already had practically grown children, and because I didn’t, I was sure I didn’t want children . . .” She paused. “And then I got pregnant—had stopped worrying about it, I guess, I still don’t know how it happened, though I know Jimmy never believed me . . .” She halted, looked at Hugh, and with her voice full of wonder said, “Then, big surprise: I loved being a mother! I thought it would ruin my life, I’m so ambitious, I hadn’t written the books I wanted to, but no, no, no. When I could steal only a few hours for myself I was more concentrated. I worked faster, harder, so I could get back to that fascinating little creature, growing, changing every minute. Being a mother focused me, made me bolder. It was the best thing in my life, the most rewarding, and I almost didn’t do it—it’s scary, spooky to think of, that I almost let the best thing in my life slip away, never happen.” Her eyes sparkled, freckled forehead wrinkling with surprise. He loved the way her mind worked, and had grown to enjoy that she blurted her deepest feelings. It was thrilling. Hugh leaned in, pausing as he neared her lips. She didn’t balk, so he kissed her.

The Kiss II

The instant their mouths touched, Margery's jaw opened cavernously, Hugh's lips were suctioned inside, and her encompassing teeth raked his skin. Her canines seemed to lengthen and sharpen into saber tooth tiger's. Instinctively he pulled away.

"Mmm," she murmured, eyes shut, lips waiting for more. He studied what he could see of her teeth. They looked normal. He decided he had hallucinated and leaned in for another kiss.

This time he was sucked in deeper, her mouth closing tighter around his lips and her incisors tugging so hard he felt sure she was drawing blood. He wondered if this was a style of kissing that he was ignorant of. He forced himself to stay, thinking perhaps he would learn to enjoy it. But lingering didn't teach him to like her razor-ringed vacuum of a kiss.

She ended it this time. Leaning against his cheek, she whispered, "Let's go to your place."

They were a block away. Resigned, Hugh marched toward the point of no return. He longed to put her in a cab but felt it would be profoundly rude to reject a woman who wanted to have sex with him. Also unprecedented. Perhaps male movie stars, pro athletes and rock 'n' rollers were practiced at saying no to sex. Not Hugh. Since he had stopped seeing Hilda, the physical aloneness of grief, the longing to be held, to forget death in the heat of life, had returned redoubled. Still, he didn't want to be eaten alive. Better get out while he could still say no.

“This is what you claim you want,” Salazar irritatingly pointed out almost every time Hugh saw him. “To say no to women.” Until this trying kiss, Hugh judged he had been doing well. He had said a cruel no to Hilda about a relationship he judged inappropriate; he had said a firm no to his mother-in-law’s latest request that he add Father’s Day to the already established family gatherings of Rosh Hashanah, Thanksgiving, Chanukah, Passover, and Mother’s Day; and he had marshalled a mutinous no to Karen Watanabe when she tried to bully him into asking Francine to add a grant specifically for the film festival to her already generous annual donation.

But there was no *no* forthcoming as Hugh and Margery passed Joe the Doorman, who looked discreetly away while he absorbed the shock of seeing the widower bring a woman upstairs; and no *no* while he put his key in the lock and swung open the door for her to enter his apartment—only to find himself ignoring the *no* of a photo of Amy and baby photos of Ginnie and Ray. Long ago Amy had put the pictures of their children on a side table next to the front door, a location for tickets, letters to mail, keys, any item one needed before leaving home. The day after burying her Hugh added one of Amy. She was seven months pregnant with Ray in the photo, her rounded face swollen to a full moon. It was a snapshot she disliked, but he cherished the merriment brimming in her eyes. She had been unsure of motherhood while carrying Ginnie; with Ray she knew she was going to enjoy his innocent greed.

“Your place is lovely!” Margery elbowed past him into the living room. She merely glanced at the couch and wing chair, sagging and strained from the bounces and spills of two growing children, and at the expanse of floorboards scarred by their play. Instead she made a thorough survey of the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that ran the length

of one wall, mostly a legacy of Amy's love of fiction. At the far end was a section that consisted of film books and quarterlies. "Oh my. Look at this. It's a treasure trove!"

She pulled out *Painting with Light*. "None of these are on Kindle."

"Or ever will be. They're too obscure."

"That's what makes collections like this so precious," she mused. "What's this?" She reached for Hugh's book, published twenty-two years ago: *Caligari to Psycho: The Evolution of Noir*. "You wrote this." Margery settled on the gray corduroy couch with the book and said, "Tell me about it. When did you write it?"

He explained that with Amy's encouragement he had expanded his senior thesis into a book that he had been paid a pittance to write, that had taken him too long to finish, that had never earned the small annuity they had fantasized it might, and that years later embarrassed him when Aaron Lefkowitz wrote his masterful survey of American noir, *Unhappy Endings*. Lefkowitz devoted an entire chapter wittily debunking Hugh's faulty correlation of German Expressionism and American Noir, and along the way corrected two outright blunders Hugh had asserted about Expressionism's influence on Hitchcock. Aaron, a gentle man whom Hugh had met several times at festivals, had stated his objections gently, but Hugh felt that tenderness only made them more damning.

He confessed all this to Margery and volunteered other anecdotes of his incompetence as a writer of grants, program notes, and lectures, responding at length to her follow-up questions, although he could hear her inquiries were migrating from polite to cursory to impatient. While doing his best to cool her ardor, he remained as far away from her as possible, perched on a spare chair against the back wall. She reclined on his couch, an arm stretched out as if to suggest there was plenty of room available for him to

join her. But he held his position. He had never felt more reluctant to kiss a woman in his life. Was it possible to fuck without kissing?

Eventually she seemed to understand he was stalling and stopped prompting him with questions. She looked long and hard into his eyes, lips forming something that might be a teasing smile, might be a disgusted frown. “So,” she said at last, “it’s late. I should be getting to bed,” but she didn’t make a move.

Hugh leapt to his feet. “I’ll go down and help you find a cab.”

She squinted for a long second, disgust clarifying on her lips, then twisting into a grimace. “Right-o,” she said in a hitherto unused English accent. She stood up, arms folded, staring down at the floor.

Embarrassed that he had brought her up to his apartment only to boot her out, he marched at her. When he broke the invisible barrier of appropriate distance, her angular face came up, startled. He dive-bombed at her downturned mouth. Margery’s arms opened, body melting into the kiss. Unfortunately her mouth was as stainless-steel devouring as before. To escape, Hugh took the risk of seeming to go too fast, disengaging, sliding down to her neck. At her murmur of pleasure when he nibbled there he felt enormous relief. He didn’t have to kiss her lips again tonight. They fell onto the couch, petting each other through denim like teenagers. Primarily to steer clear of her face, Hugh kissed lower, to her slight cleavage, fumbling with the small slippery buttons of her blouse until she whispered at his bowed head, “We’re too grownup for this. Let’s go to bed.”

He took her hand and trotted her to the bedroom as if they were late for a plane. He recalled fondly what this had been like with Hilda as he unbuckled his belt, stepped

out of his pants, glad this wasn't going to be his first experience of lovemaking after losing Amy, and it was only as he continued to strip naked in the dark, furtively glancing at Margery's silhouette as she stepped out of her panties, that it occurred to him he was setting a momentous precedent. He was taking a woman into Amy's bed. And this realization, once in place, spelled catastrophe.

2.6

“Hughie,” Leslie said breathlessly into her cell phone. From the blare and scream of sirens he guessed she was en route to her office. “How the hell are you?”

That she was calling at the early hour of eight-ten, that she had added “hell” to her usual inquiry as to his current state of being, told him she knew something about last night’s fiasco. How humiliating. “I’m good, and you?” he dodged. “Did you have to go to court over that development in Bayside?”

“What? Oh no, thank God. They backed down. And . . . Oh, wait! I have news for you. I violated a handful of legal ethics getting it so don’t tell on me. I found out your landlord has approached the Gordons about selling your building. They passed. That’s the good news.”

“And the bad?”

“The Gordons passed ’cause it’s too small a deal for them. Only thirty units if you gut the building and combine the twos and ones into threes, which is the hot size in our nabe. Stein is definitely warehousing to sell to a developer and someone will definitely go for it, the market is so hot. Especially downtown.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, it’s shitty, it really sucks, but you were gonna get priced out sooner or later. At least with Stein wanting to sell I can get you some money out of it. You’re sitting in a three-bedroom next to a studio. Stein can combine and have a four-bedroom condo to sell, a real rarity in the Village, worth fifty percent more than a three. I’ll call

Stein and start negotiating. You have no insider rights and your lease is up in two years but I'll let slip that I'm a close friend so he'll know it's costing you nothing to create all kinds of irritating delays. I could easily stretch out an eviction into three, five, maybe seven years. That's a lot of lost income to Stein. Just to get rid of the nuisance he'll offer you relocation dough."

"You mean, he'll pay me to move?"

"It's really worth it to him to get you out of there as soon as possible. To gut it, he needs the building empty. You won't be the only one he'll pay. I'll just make sure he pays you more than anybody else."

"But where am I gonna move? Unless he offers me fifty thousand I won't be able to rent a studio in Manhattan."

"Fifty thousand! I can do better than that. Bet I can get you a quarter of a mil. You can use that as a down payment on a nice two-bedroom condo in Brooklyn. No more renting, Hugh. What am I saying? Brooklyn! Shit, then I'll never see you. This is a terrible plan. If we find you someplace great in Brooklyn, do you promise you won't neglect your old Manhattan friend?"

She wanted him close by, which on this embarrassed morning reinforced his belief that she was the woman for him. "Of course I'll see you but this is terrible news. I'm losing my home. We moved here when Ginnie was four. Ray's never had any other home."

"I know, sweetie, I know. I'm sorry. I'll get you enough money so you can make a lovely new home, okay?"

"What if he calls our bluff? You said I have no rights."

“But you have me representing you! That’s better than having rights.” As if awed by Leslie’s statement, the hubbub around her was muzzled, replaced by echoing, soft chimes. In this new quiet her voice blared: “We’ll figure it out. Listen, I’m in the lobby and I’ll lose you in the elevator so let me get to why I called. Margery is sure to check in today and I wanted to know what I’m allowed to say. Not that I *have* to say anything, but she’s going to know I’ve spoken to you. I mean you don’t have to tell me a thing.” She stopped abruptly and waited.

Hugh felt certain she was fibbing. How could she be sure Margery wasn’t still in his bed unless she knew she had fled it last night?

“Hugh, are you there?” she demanded into his silence. “Did I lose you?”

“I’m here.” The ghost of his father draped him in Yankee reserve. He shivered at its chilling touch and said, “A gentleman never tells.”

“And you are a perfect gentleman,” Leslie agreed. “That’s what I love about you. One of the many things I love about you. But . . . you do like her? I mean, you know, not necessarily romantically, but you share my high opinion of Margery? I just think she’s terrific.”

Why was Leslie worried about his opinion of Margery rather than vice versa? Maybe she really did know nothing. Had he lost his grip entirely, spinning into paranoia? “She’s a caring, energetic, and fascinating woman,” Hugh said, describing not Margery but Leslie.

“Wow, that’s great. What an endorsement!”

Hugh hurried to add, “Don’t tell her I said so.”

Leslie laughed. “Playing hard to get, eh? That’s my boy. Good move. Okay, gotta go. Call you later, sweetie.”

While shaving he decided this was the proper attitude to strike: all praise of Margery, no mention of his failure. The truly pressing issue going forward was what to do about his haunted bed. How to get a new one? Furniture purchases had been Amy’s domain. More likely he was lazy about them. 1-800-MATTRES popped into his head from commercial breaks on *Seinfeld*. He located his cell, charging on the kitchen counter, and flipped it open to place an order, but it occurred to him that phoning for a bed was the kind of thing a recent college graduate furnishing a first apartment would do, not a fifty-one-year-old widower. Was 1-800-MATTRES (*Leave off the last ‘S’ for savings!*) really the right choice to cart away the matrimonial bed, where he and Amy had slept and loved and said their last goodbye? And if not 1-800-MATTRES, who was fit to be trusted with those cherished and sad memories? Bed, Bath & Beyond?

Leslie was the natural person to advise him. He debated whether to text her. He had decided no, that it was ridiculous to be in such a rush to get a new bed, when the phone beeped. Startled, he nearly dropped it, juggling it twice from hand to hand before making a clean catch. He nearly dropped it a second time, shocked to discover a text from Margery, then doubly shocked by its content:

Last night magical. Want a
home cooked meal tonight?

Hugh stared at the backlit letters, unable to fathom her enthusiasm for more of him until he noticed the time above the message, 8:45 AM. He’d better get to the office.

Walking briskly west toward the subway, he decided he had no choice but to seek advice from a source he had sworn to avoid after the pizza powwow seven months ago.

“Are you injured?” Kyle grumbled on his landline in a baritone of gravel and sleep.

“No.”

“Goodnight.”

“Wait. This is urgent. Goodnight? It’s almost nine!”

Kyle groaned. “I got to bed three hours ago.”

“What were you doing all night?”

“Working. Some of us actually work.”

“I work.”

“You watch movies. That’s not work.”

“You sculpt. Or glue stuff together. How is that work?”

“Okay. We’re both frauds. What’s the problem now? Karen pimping you out to male donors?”

“That’s not funny. In fact, it’s offensive.”

“To who? Rich fags or you? Not the Jap. She is a pimp.”

“Jesus, you’re racist. Cut it out.”

“You’re such a PC schoolmarm. Tell me your problem or let me sleep.”

“I went to bed with someone I shouldn’t have.”

“Unless she has AIDS and you had unprotected sex, that’s impossible.”

“I didn’t want to go to bed with her, but I did, so it was a disaster.”

“That’s your emergency? For Chrissakes don’t worry about your dick not working. Happens to everybody sometimes—”

“I wasn’t . . .” Hugh interrupted, but Kyle was giving no ground.

“—just means you didn’t really want to stick it in.”

“I didn’t . . .” Hugh tried again.

Kyle was enjoying himself too much to listen. “Was she ugly? What’s ugly to you, anyway? I hope you’re not a skinny freak. Chubby is good. Cushion for the pushin’.”

“I WASN’T IMPOTENT,” Hugh shouted. “I CAME IN FIVE SECONDS!”

Three passersby stopped in their tracks to study him. One looked up from the dog she was walking, another from the cab he was trying to hail, and the last from the child she was shepherding to nursery school. Mortified, Hugh veered sharply downtown, thinking he’d catch the subway at its next stop.

“P.E. eh? Why so scared of her pussy? Vagina dentata? Who is this terrifying bitch?”

“I wasn’t scared. It’s just that I didn’t like . . .” He sighed. Now that it came right down to it he didn’t want to supply details, the haunted bed or the painful kiss.

“Didn’t like what?” Kyle snapped, impatient.

“She does this odd thing with her mouth.”

“What? Drool?”

“The way she does it,” he stammered, “was a little dentata.”

Kyle growled. “Holy Shit. She bit you?”

“No, no, but she . . . raked me.”

“The bitch bit your cock? Fuck. Now I’m awake.” Kyle’s hoarse voice faded to a whisper. “I need an espresso. Call you back in five.”

To be available Hugh would have to walk to work. He had reached Hudson Street when Kyle’s follow-up call buzzed in his pocket. “Is your dick okay? Maybe you’d better see an MD.”

Hugh explained the much simpler facts, that he didn’t like her kiss and that when they stripped and got into Amy’s bed, he was overwhelmed with embarrassment and a kind of dread, so he entered her without any preliminary and ejaculated almost immediately. He tried to make up for his selfish behavior by kissing down her chest but when he reached her belly Margery pulled him up from descending farther. Instead she positioned his right thigh against her sex and rubbed and pushed, while he did his best to flex his quadriceps powerfully, until she shuddered and released a single moan. He suspected she was faking. She snuggled in the crook of his arm. Before he could apologize and explain about the matrimonial bed, she resumed talking about his collection of film books as if there had been no interruption. She concluded a long monologue about the value of true film criticism as opposed to reviewing by declaring it was time for him to write another book, perhaps about the ins and outs of film programming. He said, “I’m not a writer,” and she said, “Nonsense,” then glanced at her watch and said, “Oh, I have to go. I have”—she laughed—“a power breakfast at the Regency at 7:30, can you believe it?” He didn’t protest. He assumed she was making a polite excuse for her escape and that he would never hear from her again.

“Why?” Kyle said. “You think she went to bed with a fifty-year-old widower expecting you to last two hours?”

“How about five minutes? I lasted five seconds.”

“What are you, twelve? First times don’t count. Even teenagers know the virgin fuck always sucks. What happened with Brunhilda? Was that magic the first time?”

“Yes.”

Silence. Then: “Really? Great sex right away?”

“Yep.”

“Why the hell did you dump her?”

Hugh ignored that. “So you’re saying Margery still wants to date?”

“No, she’s making you dinner to dump you. Of course she still wants to date. Women never know when to give up. Fuck. You woke me up for this drivel. You’ve got to get a grip on yourself, man. It was a bad one-night stand. Standard shit. You’re gonna have plenty of ’em. Text her you’re busy and go back to fucking thirty-year-olds.”

“Hilda was forty.”

“Whatever. Goodnight. And fuck you.”

It took Hugh a moment to realize Kyle had hung up. He had just flipped the Nokia shut when it trembled and beeped. Margery again:

Horrified I invited you to
dinner by text. Can I call you
to do it properly?

Abreast of a crowded bus stop, Hugh stopped walking so he could concentrate on pressing the correct tiny buttons on his phone. His children were used to his ludicrous typos and even odder Nokia auto-corrections but writer Margery might judge him more harshly.

NO, he typed and paused to think of what he could plausibly claim to be doing that a phone call was out of the question but a text was not. Heading into a staff meeting? Late for work? He was wondering if those were convincing reasons when it occurred to him that he was in fact late for work and due at a staff meeting. A bus zoomed across his vision, belching to a stop. The crowd beside him surged forward. Someone's computer bag whacked the back of his right elbow, and the Nokia flew out of his hands, end over end, a tiny black bird that disappeared underneath the bus's gigantic wheels.

"Oh, dear," said a little old woman on the queue. She was wearing a midnight blue dress with a lace collar, and her head was covered by a black shawl, her hands and forearms by evening gloves. Hugh couldn't decide if she was dressed for grief or a gala. She glanced up at him, her face a mask of Kabuki white makeup, mouth a garish red. "You're screwed," she said and nudged him out of her way.

2.7

Ray was delighted and brimming with pleasant sarcasm. “About time, Dad. That flip phone was reactionary tech. The candy-ass nineties. This is the kickass millennium. Budget surpluses are for sissies. Iraq isn’t Vietnam. Men carry desks in the palms of their hands. You’re an important dude. You need a Blackberry. Writing emails on the fly. Or at least *in* the bus, instead of under it.”

Hugh took Ray’s advice, and after wading through Verizon’s contractual choices and obtaining a sensuously curved device with a muscular miniature keyboard; and after feeling invaded and helpless while Melissa plugged his new phone into his work computer, forcing them to swap data in a way that seemed sexually perverse if not outright rape; and finally after retrieving the new and now information-loaded cell phone, Hugh called Margery and in response to her wary hello told her breathlessly that collision with a bus had pressed the send button prematurely, causing his rude one-word response to her dinner invitation.

That night they laughed about it in her marital bed, where Hugh felt more at ease, or lasted longer anyway, especially since he didn’t linger on kissing her. He had fun telling her about the phone fiasco because Margery, as Leslie had predicted, was witty, charming, and caring. “That’s what you get for even typing no to me,” she said, unaware of how close her joke came to the truth of Hugh’s fears. “Next time, a cruise missile will silence your Blackberry if you dare turn me down for dinner.”

Then their exchanges became intimate and comforting. He confessed about being spooked by his bed. Tears welled in her eyes. She hugged him tight. He said he would get a new mattress and she whispered, “Take your time. Whatever makes sense for you. Don’t do anything you’re not sure of.” Her helpfulness had no bounds. She was not only sensitive to his grief, she provided tips on how to take advantage of his new smartphone’s capabilities. He opened up about his job: what movies they were angling to get an early peek at for the festival, his disgust at Karen’s insistent pressure that he compete with the New York Film Festival for big studio movies and even more at her irritating demands that he bring in actors to interview about their films, rather than, as she put it, “those grungy, mumbling indie directors.”

“You’re right,” Margery reassured. “Directors are who we should hear from, who can provide revelations. You have to stick with them, you’re right, but I know what Karen means. Indie directors all look like what you’re afraid your brilliant teenage son will become if you don’t push him to get better grades. Maybe you can compromise? Have a couple actors with directors?”

“Put an actor and a director on a stage and the director just grins and nods,” Hugh answered, and Margery laughed with delight.

In turn she confided how difficult it was to negotiate a separation agreement, that she was having a hard time putting aside her rage at her eighty-year-old Peter Pan husband and focusing on what was best for their boy Sean. She worried Sean would eventually choose to blame her for the divorce rather than his adulterous father because that was easier: she was around all the time, a handy, non-retaliating target, whereas his aging narcissistic father turned to ice if criticized. And besides, soon Jimmy would

probably disappear permanently from heart failure at fucking way above, as she put it, “his cock-grade.” Hugh could listen to her talk all night. Her restless mind, a little frightening when it focused on him, was endlessly entertaining as she toured him through her smart world.

Hours after purchasing his Blackberry Hugh couldn't imagine life without it and suspected that someday he might feel just as passionate about Margery. It was odd to reflect on this past year, a landscape filled with new women and old friends he was coming to know in a different way. Leslie was caring for him with the attention and detail she used to reserve for her sons and husband. Karen worried about his sleep, Melissa protected his turf at work. He would treasure forever the memories of Hilda's energy and grace when they made love. Even his once-a-week free tennis with Francine was a gift of bereavement. He was grateful and guilty at having the attention and affection of these brilliant, competent, nurturing women. It was a betrayal of Amy's memory—perhaps on some moral plane equivalent to cheating on a living wife—but in the dark, in his new bed courtesy of same-day delivery from Bloomingdale's, comforted by the warmth of Margery curled against him, he had to admit that exploring this new land of women, although it came at an unacceptable price, was an adventure he was glad not to have missed.

Three weeks later Hugh reported his progress to Roberto Salazar at the monthly check-up they had settled on as a compromise when Hugh, feeling that everything had been discussed at least five times and chafing at the co-pay, began agitating for an end date to his grief-counseling. Salazar ignored Hugh's delight as a Blackberry owner, instead reacting to his transformation into Margery's boyfriend with an irritating

observation: “You finally succeeded in saying or rather texting no to a woman and you immediately took it back.”

“It was an accident. I didn’t really say no.”

Salazar grinned. “Freud said there are no accidents.”

“Freud has been discredited.”

“Who isn’t discredited? Hugh, I’m serious, I really do want to understand how all these changes happened. Why did you take back the honesty of your text? Why go to her apartment when you didn’t want to? Why are you having sex with a woman whose kiss you can’t stand and who makes you feel like a failure?”

“She doesn’t make me feel like a failure!” Hugh was pissed. He had trusted Salazar with his deepest feelings, something he wasn’t eager to do with any other man or most women, and now Salazar was using them against him. “And the sex is fine.”

“Fine? That’s enthusiastic. Is her kiss getting better?”

Hugh changed the subject. “Look, all that’s out of date. We’ve seen each other every other night this month, four nights in a row this week. I have a much better understanding of the pressure she was under from her ex to be an achiever. And from her mother. Really it started with her mother. Both made her feel she had to impress them with achievements, a bird dog fetching their kill is the way she puts it. Anyway, the point is: she doesn’t make me feel like a failure.”

Salazar ticked off his indictment with his fingers: “She keeps poking you about writing another book of film criticism. She keeps demanding you get Karen to put you on the Foundation’s board. She wants you to apply for a teaching job at Columbia. And lastly, there’s this bizarre insistence that you fire your cleaning woman.”

“That’s not Margery. It’s Leslie who wants me to fire Olga. Mostly because she fired her. Or stopped using her as a temporary. Leslie never really hired her.”

“Leslie. Right. The woman you *really* love,” Salazar said. “You’re pursuing a woman you don’t love because you can’t have the woman you do love. Is that what you’re saying no to—love?”

Hugh crossed his arms and stared at Salazar’s faded Shiraz rug. He decided this would be his last grief-counseling session. He could easily say no to Salazar.

The therapist followed up in a gentle voice. “I honestly believe you should explore why you’re seeing a woman you don’t really like and who is so critical of you.”

“I like her a lot. She’s vivacious, she’s accomplished, she has a brilliant mind. So the sex is . . . mundane. So what?”

“Isn’t sex pretty important in a romantic relationship?”

Hugh studied a pair of yellow-and-black-striped tigers leaping at each other against a deep red background. There was little detail to their faces, no expression. He tried to make his own face as impassive.

“I think so,” Roberto said. “But maybe you feel differently. Maybe it wasn’t that important in your marriage. Maybe you don’t want to have a better sexual relationship than you did with Amy.”

Hugh uncrossed his arms. Cleared his throat. “You’re being sarcastic.”

“I’m not. I see several couples who really don’t feel it’s important in their marriages, especially after the first few years. Companionship, shared values and interests, raising children—much more important to them.”

“She doesn’t belittle me,” Hugh said.

“I’m quoting you, Hugh. And not from last month. From today. You started this session saying things were going well with Margery”—he raised a finger for emphasis—“*even though* she keeps talking about you doing more, that she makes you feel you’re not accomplished enough for her.”

“She’s a very ambitious woman. That’s all. She assumes I am too and she’s trying to be encouraging. She’s not belittling me. On the contrary, she’s encouraging me to be more.”

“Do you want to be more? You seem to me very satisfied by your work. As you should be. You enjoy what you do and you have a very important, prestigious job.”

“It’s not important, it’s not prestigious.” Hugh was embarrassed he had given Salazar this impression. Had he been bragging? He loathed braggarts.

“To most people your job is a great job. Even if they don’t love movies. And in general to be paid to do something you love to do is out of most people’s reach. From your description Margery isn’t anywhere near as satisfied and happy in her work as you are. She seems always to want to be more famous, richer, sell more books, write movies, television shows, she seems to want to dominate every field she encounters. She’s never content with herself and her work. From that point of view, which I admit is my point of view, you’re more successful than she is.”

Hugh blamed Salazar for what happened at dinner with Margery that night. Things really had been settling into a good pattern. Just the two of them after their separate trying days, sharing dinners and feelings, exchanging advice about their work, enjoying efficient lovemaking and comfy snuggling. He hadn’t protested when Leslie, calling with more dismaying intelligence about the rapid progress of Stein’s attempt to

sell the building to a developer, referred to Margery as “your girlfriend.” The trouble came when they tried to be a public couple.

They went to the ballet at Lincoln Center as guests of Bud and Joanne Cousins, whom Margery had described as “my oldest and dearest friends who are dying to meet you.” *Sleeping Beauty* was lovely to look at, although long and sometimes repetitious, which Hugh accepted as a convention of the form. Afterward they walked to Gabriel’s, an elegant restaurant whose prices made Hugh nervous, especially after Bud ordered a bottle of Barolo that Hugh noticed cost a hundred and seventy-five bucks. Since they had been treated to first-ring tickets Hugh felt he ought to offer to pay the whole bill until Bud casually agreed with the constantly-refilling-their-glasses waiter that they needed a second bottle. Hugh decided manners be damned, half the tab was all he could afford.

Then things went south. Bud said in a friendly way, “You know what you’re perfect for, Hugh. You should run the Lincoln Center film program. The New York Film Festival has become predictable, the theater needs an update, in fact the whole program needs new blood and new money.”

“You’re right,” Margery said, squeezing Hugh’s knee with excitement. “They desperately need a new head. Who do we know, Bud? How do we get this done?”

Maybe it was because he was fretting about being seen as a cheapskate, or maybe it was all the booze (he’d downed a cocktail and more than his share of two bottles of wine); certainly he was tired, full, and tipsy. Whatever the reason, he said, “Head of the Lincoln Center Film Society? Oh my God. Save me. I couldn’t handle that collection of star-fuckers.”

Bud retracted his chin as if avoiding a punch. “Sorry.”

His wife frowned. “Star-fuckers?”

Recovering from his surprise, Bud said dryly, “I would think you’d be used to handling stars anyway.”

“Of course you can handle it, Hugh,” Margery persisted. “They’d be thrilled to have you. Everyone knows the Hamilton festival is the great event in New York.”

“Great?!” Hugh sputtered. “The New York Film Festival is as great an event as they come. That’s exactly what’s wrong with it. There’s a thousand times more pressure on them than on little us. NYFF is a jungle of cut-throat politics. Last thing it’s about is appreciating film. And that’s what I care about. Not slobbering over movie stars.”

Bud raised a hand for the check. “Sorry I brought it up. Sore subject, I guess.”

Hugh’s cheeks warmed. He didn’t look, but he assumed Margery was wincing, hurt by his abusive tone, humiliated in front of her friends. “I can’t handle that kind of job, that’s all I mean to say,” he said, hoping self-deprecation would dilute his anger. “We’re just movie nerds. They’re the cool kids. I really can’t handle them,” he insisted, glancing at Margery and seeing not the hurt he had imagined but a frown. Was she perplexed? Irritated? One of the worst things about dating was that he couldn’t read a new woman’s expression anywhere near as well as he used to obtain clues from Amy’s wry smile or narrowing of eye. “As I’m proving right now,” he said, grinning sheepishly at Joanne, who, for whatever reason, smiled as if she understood and didn’t mind his outburst. “I can’t even handle a couple glasses of wine without becoming belligerent. Sorry.” He exhaled heavily, like Grandpa when loaded, and by God if he didn’t hear himself say, “It’s a bad world,” just like the old man.

Once they were in a cab heading downtown it was clear that Margery was furious. Her frown remained fixed, her down-turned mouth sealed until they were below 23rd Street. She mumbled into the well of the car, “You know Bud is on the board of Lincoln Center.”

Hugh croaked, “No.” Cleared his throat. “No, I didn’t.”

“You didn’t Google him? Or Joanne?”

Hugh shook his head. “You said they were old friends who loved the ballet, that’s all I knew about them.” He wanted to add “I was having dinner, not networking,” but thought better of it.

“You didn’t wonder how they had those seats? First ring, center?”

“I assumed they were rich.”

“Rich is an understatement. She’s a Brandt.”

He wanted to say, “Who gives a fuck?” Instead: “What’s a Brandt?”

“Oh come on!” she shouted, exasperation unleashed. “Don’t be ridiculous. You know the Brandts. The fabulously wealthy mining family? Of course you know who they are. Her brother Fred is a major donor to the Hamilton Foundation, for God’s sakes. You know him, right?”

“Right, of course.” He did know Joanne’s brother. Sort of. Hugh paid little attention to the stream of faces at gala events. They reminded him of his boring cousins at Great Aunt Helen’s massive Christmases. Blazers and pressed trousers talking golf, bond portfolios, college bowl games. Hugh was a voluntary exile, slinking off with sweater-vest-and-wide-wale-corduroy-wearing cousin Henry to watch *It’s A Wonderful Life* on the small black-and-white TV in the children’s room. Years later, hearing the

news that Henry was dying of AIDS in San Francisco, Hugh's mother asked, "He didn't ever . . . bother you, did he?" In fact Henry was the only member of the family who never bothered Hugh.

Still he felt properly scolded and said no more. Neither did Margery until they were in Hugh's apartment, his place having become their usual venue post-date. Her co-op was being shown by brokers, often first thing in the morning, and anyway Hugh wasn't eager to be surrounded by her husband's photos of himself with the last eight Presidents of the United States. The one of JFK and the young Jimmy rigging a sail off Cape Cod was profoundly intimidating.

Hugh made a beeline for the fridge to pour a glass of seltzer. He was parched and he wanted to mitigate what was sure to be a hangover. He asked if she wanted some. She shook her head no. Then she broke her silence: "Should I go home?"

He gulped half the glass, suppressed a belch. "Whatever you want. I'm okay either way."

"That sounds like you want me to go."

"You're angry at me."

"You sound angry at me right now. At Gabriel's you sounded angry at everyone."

"I wasn't angry. Just . . ." He sighed. His breath reeked of Barolo. He took another gulp. His share of the check had been a day's salary.

"You were rude to Bud. Very rude. He wanted to help you. He's in a position to help you."

"I don't need help!"

"You're going to need a raise if you have to move and buy a new place."

He nearly said, “That’s none of your fucking business.” He struggled for calmer words. “Sorry. Look, I’m tired and drunk. Let’s get some sleep. We’ll talk about it in the morning. I’ll apologize to Bud tomorrow, okay?” he added and immediately wanted to kick himself for it. He finished his glass and poured another. “I’m dehydrated.”

“Seltzer’ll just make that worse,” Margery said. “The carbonation. Drink tap water.”

The liter bottle was made of soft plastic and almost empty. He considered throwing it at her. “Good idea.” He did not want to fight about anything. The last argument he had had with a woman was five years ago, a year into Amy’s treatment when she was blaming a nurse for delays beyond anyone’s control. “I’m on chemo, God damn it,” Amy had shouted at him when he objected. “I get to be a bitch.” He had sworn off bickering after that and hadn’t missed it.

Margery left the kitchen. He finished the seltzer, then filled a glass with tap water. “Wimp,” he whispered. He searched for Margery. The lights were on in his bedroom, and the bathroom door was shut. He heard the bathtub filling. She had never taken a bath at his place, although she had commented several times that they calmed her down after a stressful day. Amy had relished her baths too, especially once ill. Hugh never took them. In fact, no one had taken a bath in there since . . .

“Oh my God!” Margery shouted in a voice filled with horror. He heard something bang. He ran to the door. It was locked.

“Ugh,” Margery groaned.

Had she fallen, hit her head? “Margery!” He banged the door. Turned his shoulder, ready to knock it down.

It opened. Margery, in panties but no bra, mouth distorted by disgust, pointed at the tub.

Hugh had to move past her to get a view. Shit-brown water, lighter in color with each gush, was sputtering unevenly from the faucet. The tub had filled with a few inches of rusty water and the dry sides were spattered with dozens of drops of something gray. He sat on the edge, released the drain so it would empty, turned the hot and cold faucets on full. The water was already nearly clear. “It’s okay. They shut the water off each season when they flush the system and it hasn’t been run since . . .” He didn’t finish.

Margery appeared next to him, clutching a towel, an accusing finger aimed at the tub’s sides. “It’s filthy. She never cleaned it! There’s grime everywhere.”

“Of course she used to clean it!” he snapped, his patience exhausted. “She’s dead.”

“What?” Margery slapped his shoulder lightly, as if to wake him up. “I’m talking about Olga,” she said, making an effort to speak softly but sounding like a scold anyway. “Doesn’t she ever clean it?”

Hugh realized the gray dots, dripping now into muddy smears, were the result of a uniform film of dust getting wet from the faucet’s splashes. He sloshed clear water all around to wash the sides.

“Didn’t you notice the dust?” Margery backed away, gesturing at the tub area. “It’s like Miss Haversham’s. Leslie said she was incompetent, but this”—Margery dropped the towel and reached for her bra—“this is worse. Gross negligence. You have to fire her.” She put on her blouse. “I’m going home. Sorry. This totally freaked me out. I didn’t know what was coming out of that faucet for a second. I’m going. I have to

be in my own bed tonight to get any sleep. Sorry.” She turned to go but stopped to add, “Seriously, Hugh, there’s something wrong with you if you don’t fire that woman. Seriously wrong.”

Hugh thoroughly washed down the walls of the tub until all the soot was gone. He heard Margery putting on her shoes in the bedroom, walking down the hall. Running water prevented him from being sure she had left the apartment until he went to the front door and verified her coat and purse had been taken. He double-locked it, as always. Then he did something he had never done before. He picked up the dangling chain lock and slotted it onto the door, so if someone pried open the bottom and top deadbolts, they would still be stopped. There hadn’t been a burglary in the building during the twenty years Hugh had lived there. Not a mugging, not a single intruder, and yet Hugh longed for another bolt, a thicker door, perhaps a moat stocked with piranhas, whatever it took to guarantee he would be securely alone.

2.8

On waking, Hugh found an email from Margery on his Blackberry:

Sorry I rushed out. Need to have Sunday Mom
dinner with Sean tonight, but let's talk
this afternoon.

He responded with the briefest email he had yet composed to her:

Sure. Just watching a Mets doubleheader.
Call anytime.

His phone thrashed on the coffee table at 4:37. He didn't answer. He decided to email her later, while she was busy with her boy, that he had fallen asleep. Almost true. He had hardly slept all night and he kept dozing off through seven hours of swings and misses.

There were no messages from her when he woke up on Monday. He was grateful. He didn't hear from her all that day or evening. That was a relief too. By Tuesday morning, however, when there was still no word, he became anxious, wondering when she would make contact.

Lunchtime was the answer. He was walking on the esplanade under a clear blue sky, enjoying a warm gentle July breeze, a perfect summer day that would have cheered Amy, even during the worst of her chemo treatments, into girlish excitement as she tugged Hugh off the couch to walk over to the Hudson and watch the sun set before they dined al fresco. He was remembering her glee when Margery rumbled his pocket.

Leaning against the rail, his back to New Jersey, studying the ever-expanding West Side's condo skyline, he dug out his Blackberry.

"Hi," she said, her tone brisk, wary. "Guess we both needed a couple days off."

"Yes," Hugh said.

"In fact, Hugh, I think we're both under a lot of strain, all these big transitions for both of us. Not to compare what you're going through with what I'm going through . . ."

"Divorce, moving," Hugh said. "Those are very big deals."

"Yes, they are." Margery's voice relaxed. "Thank you. Anyway, I think maybe we were moving too quickly. At least I . . ."

"Yes," Hugh interrupted.

"Ah." She paused in surprise. "So you agree. Maybe we should take a break?"

"Yes," Hugh said.

At his next grief-counseling session, he filled Salazar in: that was the last communication he'd had with Margery and the last he expected to have. "So," Salazar said, "you managed to have an entire relationship with a woman, including breaking up with her, always saying yes to whatever she proposed."

Hugh waited until his anger subsided before he commented genially, "I didn't fire Olga."

"Uh huh. But Olga is a part of your previous life. Didn't Amy hire her?"

"I said no to Leslie and to Margery about firing Olga."

Salazar looked confused. He opened his mouth to object but before he could, Hugh changed the subject. He told Salazar that he was no longer really in mourning and wanted to end therapy.

Salazar questioned that with irritating calmness. “You’re no longer in mourning?” “Deep mourning,” Hugh said, and then he politely fired his grief counselor.

It took another month for him to fire Olga. Leslie and Margery had opened his eyes to his house cleaner’s poor job performance, and yet his first impulse was still to overlook her faults. After all, he had lived this way for almost seventeen years, fifteen while Amy lived and more than another as a widower. For a while he forced himself to avert his newly sharp eyes from congealed circles of dishwashing liquid and other unidentifiable cleaning agents in the cabinet under the sink, and from film and grime in the bathroom tiles, and bathtub rings, and layers of soot atop every doorframe, picture frame, book, anything Olga presumably regarded as being out of sight or daily use.

That self-imposed blindness became impossible to sustain when he went to fetch the broom to sweep up pieces of a glass he had broken and discovered the floor of the utility/linen closet was covered in a layer of speckled crystals of Ajax. They had spilled from a box Olga had opened from the bottom instead of the easily re-sealable top. The broom he sought was resting on top of this mess. He decided to sweep up the corrosive cleaning agent—the wood floor had already developed several white blotches—rather than scold her, hoping his example would inspire her. To clear the floor he lifted the laundry basket Olga used to carry clothes to the machines in the basement and found a bag of socks in a Duane Reade bag.

At first he was baffled by their location. Then he discovered they were all singletons, their mates lost. He had wondered from time to time why his drawer of socks seemed to diminish at a steady pace; while Amy was alive he assumed she was tossing them, since she often complained his socks had holes well before he noticed them. But

after her death, when it continued, instead of asking Olga about the missing socks, he had bought more without keeping track of the rate of replacement. Evidently Olga had been losing socks at a rapid rate. And she had kept—hidden?—the unmatched singletons, which he thought bizarre. Why? Did she hope to find their mates someday? There were forty-one solo socks in the bag. Forty-one! Thinking back he realized he had been buying a few pairs every month for years. Had there been hundreds? There must have been. At what point did she give up and throw away the widower sock? And how in God's name was she losing them? The building had only six machines in the laundry room, and it was never that busy. To lose one every few months, stuck inside the dryer or falling to the floor while en route, seemed reasonable. But forty-one!

It was so appalling he confessed his disgust to Leslie. She laughed, covered her mouth. "I'm sorry. I know you're fond of her." She added in a mumble, as if Hugh couldn't hear, although of course he could: "Which is nuts." Then she said in her sweetest, most forgiving voice, but nevertheless each word spoken firmly: "If you don't mind that your house is filthy, okay. But what bothers me is she's cheating you. You're paying her for what? Eight hours? She can't be cleaning for more than two. At most."

And that was why he decided he had to let her go. Although Amy had forgiven Olga for incompetence, she would not have forgiven her for taking advantage of a widower, which must have been what was happening. Olga couldn't have been this careless and sloppy while Amy was alive. Obviously she thought Hugh was too blind or too weak to protest. Even if he wasn't offended, what else could he do but replace her? Otherwise he'd have to hire another cleaning woman to straighten up after her. He couldn't afford to waste money, especially with his building up for sale, and if he ended

up moving he'd have to fire her anyway. He certainly wasn't going to let her spoil a brand new apartment.

The night before he planned to confront her he didn't sleep a wink. First thing that morning he had withdrawn what he paid her each month—six hundred and forty dollars—to give her. At lunch he went back to the bank and took out a second month's worth. Twelve hundred and eighty dollars! That had to be enough until she found another job.

Then he considered the likelihood of her keeping another job once her new employers discovered they had to buy socks every week.

He went back to the bank intending to take out a third month. But when he saw his balance he realized it wouldn't leave him enough to pay his Amex bill, due that week, and his next pay check wouldn't appear until the end of the month. He did have enough to give her another two hundred and twenty. That brought her severance to a round number of fifteen hundred dollars. That was far too much and yet he felt it wasn't enough.

He intended to deliver the bad news right after she arrived, since he usually left for work soon after. She came in and plopped her Coach bag—a hand-me-down from Amy that she'd carefully preserved, more carefully than anything in Amy's apartment—on the kitchen counter, sipping what she had left of a takeout iced coffee. Hugh, awkward as a sixth grader asking a girl for a dance, mumbled he had something serious to discuss with her. She furrowed her brow and looked sad, probably because every serious talk they had had was about Amy's illness. Olga nodded without a reaction to Hugh's at first stumbling, then stammered, and finally hurried speech as he presented

Leslie's ongoing negotiations as having been completed, then built that into a complicated lie in which he would be moving out soon, subletting the studio apartment of a friend who was working out of town while he looked for a place to buy in Brooklyn or maybe Harlem. All that, he said, could take a year, so Olga should look for a new job.

Olga finished her iced coffee with a loud slurp, looked serious for a moment, and then seemed to cheer up. She said with a smile that she could help him pack up here and clean at his friend's apartment while he stayed there and then clean his new apartment after he moved in. Hugh shook his head, said his friend had a cleaning woman and that it could be as much as two years before Hugh had a new place of his own for Olga to clean. That was when Hugh saw the reality of her situation come into her eyes, that he wasn't going to be talked out of this, that she was really going to lose her job. And that was when he noticed the smell.

He recognized this stink, the pungent odor of onion fear, the flop sweat of dread, but for a moment he couldn't believe it was being generated by a placid five-foot-two woman who usually smelled of ammonia and gardenias. She was reacting as if what he was doing was a mortal threat. Her body had become still, eerily motionless, eyes fixed on him, a chameleon trying to blend into the surroundings, hiding from a killer.

She is utterly terrified by what I'm doing to her, he realized with horror. To be merciful he quickly ended his painful speech about how much he valued her and would miss her. He explained he was giving her fifteen hundred dollars, offering the thick envelope of cash. He told her she could go, didn't need to clean one last time.

She snatched the money as if he might try to take it back, reached into her purse, and came out with the key to his apartment. She held it up to his face as if it were a cross

and he were Dracula. “I hope you are happy with the new girl,” she said, fear wafting away from her as if she were baking a pie made of terror.

“What new girl?” Hugh asked, baffled. Did she mean his invention of a friend’s cleaning woman at the imaginary studio subplot? Or had she seen through his stammered lies?

She cocked her head, mouth twisting bitterly, eyes disgusted and furious, a look that clearly signified: Who are you kidding? “Goodbye, Mr. Reynolds,” she said, using his last name for the first time in a decade. She picked up the Coach bag and left as fast as she could.

He opened a window to clear the apartment of the stench of her pain, then called Melissa to say he would be coming in late.

“Are you okay?” Melissa asked. “You sound terrible.”

“I broke a crown. Have to see my dentist.” A plausible lie: she knew he had been grinding his teeth at night, and anyway his jaw was aching.

He took two Tylenol immediately and another two six hours later at the office, but his head ached all day. To Leslie’s question about how the firing had gone he said accurately, “It was one of the worst experiences of my life.”

The next morning his painful jaw woke him before dawn. He took two more Tylenol. Looking at himself in the mirror, he realized that if Amy had been in his position she would never have fired Olga, even if she had had to scold and fuss until Olga swept up and scrubbed properly. Amy would never have fired the woman who had seen their children through puberty and the worst of adolescence, who had seen Amy through chemo and her death at home. In his spot Amy would have done her best to keep Olga.

Life was too short to care how many matched socks you owned.

In the weeks that followed, Hugh often thought of Olga's fate, always with a stab of self-recrimination at what he had done to her. He could not forgive himself. Nearly a year had passed since he had begun his project, and he hadn't learned to say no to a woman. He had simply learned to be cruel.