

# Michelangelo's Shoulder

John Moncure Wetterau

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for w.cat

### Michelangelo's Shoulder

It dawned hot in Georgia. Don rubbed his head and blinked. He got out of bed and paused before a makeshift easel where a drawing, taped to a board, showed a woman sitting on a park bench. She was large, dressed in layers of multi-colored cotton. She reminded him of the Renoir woman in her plush living room, the dog sprawled at her feet, but she was smarter. The line across her eyebrows and tapering along her jaw was right. He'd left out a lot, but that didn't matter. If what was there was true enough, you knew the rest--like a Michelangelo shoulder emerging from stone.

He went into the bathroom and splashed water on his face.

After coffee and a piece of toast, he rolled the drawing and took it to the park where the woman fed pigeons every day. She wasn't there. She wasn't there the next day, either. The following day Don brought a loaf of bread, sat on her bench, and tossed white pellets into the air. Birds fought for each piece. He prepared the remaining bread and scattered it in one throw. "There you go--something for everybody. She'll be back soon."

A week later, she showed up. Don moved aside and asked, "Where you been?"

"Took sick."

"I've been feeding the pigeons."

"I was worrying. Thank you."

"I did a drawing of you. I wanted to name it, but--I didn't know your name."

"Ruby."

"Ruby, ah. I'm Don. You want to see it? I'll bring it tomorrow."

"Sure."

"O.K. How you feeling?"

"Better, now."

"Good." He walked to his usual bench and sat down. The sun beat on the live oak trees and sage-green strings of Spanish moss while the birds made happy sounds in front of Ruby. She had lost weight, he thought, but it was hard to tell, the way she dressed. She was a beauty once. He remembered his bloodshot eyes in the bathroom mirror. None of us getting any younger. He would give her the drawing in the morning and take off. It was time to leave Savannah, past time. Head for Portland again. Look up Lorna.

Lorna. The Art Students League. It seemed like last week that she was looking carefully into his eyes and shaking his hand, curious and unafraid, different from him in many ways, but similar in that. Painter's eyes, he thought, clear and unblinking. Couldn't tell how good she was, though--eyes are one thing; talent is another. And hard work is another.

She lived in a studio behind her parents' house on a mountain road--what was it called?--the Glasco Turnpike. Her father, Lad Charles, was a painter, a friendly guy who wore bow ties and was well liked in town. Lorna was protected, highly educated, out of reach for Don Delahanty.

He was blocky. She was slim. His neck was thick and turned with his body; her neck was graceful and turned by itself. His eyes were a slatey blue--the color of the sea on a cloudy day. Hers were almond with flecks of green. He was fair skinned. Lorna was tanned. His hair was sand colored, prematurely grizzled. Hers was light brown, sun streaked, thick, and cut short--perfect for small gold earrings. She brought with her the smell of spring. He smelled like upstate New York--dirt, dairy farms, and industrial towns. She was kind. They both were, although he had a bitter streak that dragged at him.

The pigeons took off in a sudden rush, flapping and swerving around the trees. Don stood and walked slowly across the square. "So long, Ruby."

"Be good, now," she said.

You can survive unloved, but you can't make it without loving somebody--or something. Ruby loved her birds. And who knows who else? He loved Lorna. Lorna loved Pike, or used to, and Molly, their daughter. Molly herself would be falling in love any time now, if she weren't already. Round and round we go, getting the job done. Except he hadn't gotten the job done, not unless you counted the paintings as kids. Not a happy train of thought. Piss on it, he'd have a waffle at Cleary's. Tide him over until the big feed.

On Thursdays they had the big feed, he and Riles and Kai. Thursdays, because weekends were unpredictable. He walked the six blocks to Cleary's, just around the corner from the house--Riles's house, Kai's house--he couldn't call it home exactly, although he'd spent more winters than he cared to remember in the basement studio reserved for caretakers or indigent relatives. He was a little of each--an old friend of Riles and useful around the place, watching the gallery several times a week and doing the framing jobs that came along.

The Cleary's waitresses were wearing \_Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil\_ T-shirts. Not a bad image, from the cover of the best seller, but it annoyed him to see his friends wearing advertisements.

"Pecan waffle, Don?"

"Yes, Ma'm--for my strength. It's that time again. I'm going north."

"Take me with you."

"Can't afford you."

"Next year," she suggested.

"Do my best," Don said. "Something to live for. There's not much up there, Jilly, just Yankees, shivering and eating beans."

"I could stand the shivering. Want some grits?"

"Read my mind," Don said.

He ate slowly, drank an extra cup of coffee, left a big tip, and got on with packing. By cocktail hour he had cleaned his room and stashed his belongings in a footlocker and a duffel bag. The easel and the painting gear stayed, part of the decor. He packed his best brushes, his watercolors, and a block of good paper. There was no limit to the number of lighthouse and/or lobster boat paintings he could sell, if they were cheap enough. The portraits and the figures were different. Drawn or done fully in oils, they were given away, or nearly. It was hard to put a price on them.

"How well you look, Don," Kai said.

"Thank you. I'm having my annual burst of optimism. Did Riles tell you that I'm off to Maine tomorrow?"

"Riles never tells me anything."

"Mother, really!" Riles appeared and put an arm around her shoulders. They were handsome together, short and dark with identical flashing smiles. Riles's hairline had receded considerably, and Kai's hair had long ago turned a tarnished silver, but they both were slim and upright and moved with a lack of effort that made Don feel as though he were dragging a wagon behind him. "I only just found out. Don is secretive, you know."

"Don is not good at planning," Don said.

"We must count on the turning of the seasons, Mother, the great

migrations, to bring him back to Sherman's Retreat."

"He is not a goose, Dear." She turned to Don. "The sooner you come back, the better."

"Honk," Don said, embarrassed, and added, "if you love Jesus."

"I think this calls for a Riles Blaster. Don? Mother?"

Riles Blasters were made from light rum, Grand Marnier, lime juice, and other secret ingredients combined with ice and served, after great roaring from the blender, in sweating silver tumblers. Riles claimed that they prolonged life by rendering stress inoperable and irrelevant. A Riles Blaster, he pronounced, allowed one to focus on what mattered. "What mattered" was left undefined, allowing to each a certain latitude. They toasted what mattered and then "Absent loved ones."

Blasters were reliable--one brought a sigh; two put a helpless smile on your face. It was best to switch to wine at that point. Another virtue: "A modest red becomes--acceptable." Riles pronounced each syllable of "acceptable" so lightly and with such pleasure that you had to agree. The dark side of Riles was private. Don understood and left it alone.

"Will you be seeing that attractive friend of yours?" Kai made her innocent face.

"I usually do--at least once. I'll try."

"I love that oil of her as a young woman. Would you part with it? We think it belongs in the permanent collection."

Riles raised his eyebrows, indicating that "we" meant "she."

"You may have it, of course."

"We can't afford what it's worth."

"You don't have to buy it. I'll give it to you. It's yours."

"Don, you must take something at least--for the materials." She went into the living room and returned with a check which she handed to him. "I have wanted that painting for so long," she said, breaking a silence.

"That's a hell of a lot of materials."

"Good. More paintings! It's worth ten times that."

"Quite so," Riles said.

"Well." Don raised his glass. "Thanks."

"Bon voyage." They clinked glasses and that was that. Riles and Kai were skilled at such things; they had a knack for moving on. It was a part of their youthfulness. Good genes helped, too, Don thought. Not to mention the financial wisdom of dear departed Redmond.

An hour later Don said goodnight. Feeling almost a member of the family, he went downstairs and fell asleep on the bed in the basement.

The next day he made his way to the park. "Mornin', Ruby."

"Morning to you. You late today."

"Going to be a long day. I'm taking the train north."

"Oh, my."

Don pulled the drawing from the cardboard tube and unrolled it, holding it up for her to see.

"Wooo," she said, "I used to be better lookin'."

"You still good looking."

"I like it."

"I signed it here." He pointed.

"Don Dela--hanty," she read.

"An original Delehanty. You hang on to it, maybe it will be worth something, someday."

"What you mean?"

He rolled the drawing and put it back in the tube. "It's for you; it's a present." He held it out. Ruby hesitated and then took it.

"Been a while since I had a present."

"So," Don said, "take care. See you when I get back."

"Lord willing. Thank you. Thank you for the present." The walls came down and she smiled like a girl.

"My pleasure." He bowed and walked toward the river. The Silver Meteor was due at 5:50.

Don got to bed with Lorna that summer. She wasn't quite it, though he loved her and would never tell her that. He did a portrait of her, his best yet, and gave it to Molly knowing that Lorna wouldn't accept it or would feel guilty for not paying if she did. The days were long and intense, but the summer was gone in a flash.

Strangely, he was offered a show in New York--his other long time dream--by a gallery owner who was after Lorna. He did not want to be involved in their relationship. He turned the show down, pretending that the requirements were too much trouble. It probably wouldn't have worked out, anyway, he thought. Some people have a knack for dangling what you want in front of you; when you reach for it, it disappears.

Late in October he went over to Lorna's and said goodbye. She seemed sad and a bit relieved. Molly had tears in her eyes and hugged him wholeheartedly.

The next morning a cold rain was bringing down the leaves as Don

carried his bag to the bus station. The shoulders of his tan raincoat were wet through when he boarded the Greyhound for Boston. Three rows back, he found an empty seat by a window and looked out at the glistening street. He saw a painting, full of light.

## Waiting for Happiness

Spring comes late in Maine. Snow changes to rain; branch tips redden; you can see your breath. Not a whole lot different than winter until the daffodils, crab apples, and forsythia bloom. The sun skips off the water, impossibly bright, impossibly blue. You can almost almost hear the cracking of seeds, buried and forgotten.

Charlie Garrett was as hardnosed as most. He kept going, did what he had to. "Ninety percent of success is showing up," Woody Allen said. Charlie repeated that in dire times--before medical checkups or visits to his brother, Orson.

Orson knew a lot about success and never hesitated to pass it on. "What you need, Charlie, is a Cessna. You aren't supposed to spin them, but you can. That'll clear your head, Charlie, straight down, counting as a barn comes around--one time, two times, three times--correct and pull out nice and easy." Orson dipped his knees, lowering his flattened palm. Or a catboat: "A solid little Marshall, Charlie. Putter around, take some cutie coasting. You're in sailor heaven, man, all those islands."

"I know some cuties," Miranda had said.

"Last cutie took my silver garlic press. Well, she didn't take it; she borrowed it and never returned it."

"Call her up and get it back," Orson said.

"That's what she wants you to do." Miranda was the best thing about Orson.

"I got another one."

"Where the hell did you find a silver garlic press?" Orson was impressed.

"It's aluminum, I think, or a composite material."

"Oh."

It was always like that; motion was Orson's answer to everything. Charlie stretched and checked his watch. The ten o'clock ferry from Peaks Island was edging to the dock. Soon a few dozen passengers would walk off the ramp, carrying shopping bags, slipping day packs over one or both shoulders, holding dogs on leashes. Margery, short and polite, would be toward the end of the line, one hand on the railing, blinking as she looked up at the city buildings and around for him.



They were similar physically and recognized each other as related, not lovers, not brother and sister, but distant cousins perhaps or members of a tribe--the patient, the witness bearers. "There you are," she said. Charlie stood and they patted one another's shoulders.

"You look very well, not a day over forty," Charlie said, standing back. "Here, let me take that." She handed him a stout canvas bag. "Jesus! What's in here?"

"Rocks and books. You're looking pleased with life. How's the world of architecture?"

"All right. Still looking for the perfect client." He rubbed his stomach with his free hand and pointed across the street to Standard Baking Company. "Croissants," he said. "A croissant a day keeps the doctor away. Are you hungry?"

"No. Let's get on with it."

Charlie led the way to his car, an elderly red Volvo. "Rocinante," Margery remembered.

"As good as ever." Charlie lowered the bag into the back seat.

"Could we swing by the library? I need to return these books."

"Sure. What have you been reading?"

"Tolstoy. The Russians. Dostoyevsky, Chekhov."

"That'll get you through a long night."

"There's no one like Tolstoy," Margery said. "So serene. Cosmic and down to earth at the same time."

"I wrote a novel once," Charlie said.

"What happened?"

"It wasn't very good." Charlie stopped by the library book drop.

"At least you finished."

He watched her slide three souls and twenty years work through the brass slot. "There's a story I love about Chekhov," she said, getting back into the car. "He paid a visit to Tolstoy. Late in the evening, on his way home after a certain amount of wine, he cried out to his horse and to the heavens: 'He says I'm worse than Shakespeare. Worse than Shakespeare!'"

"Wonderful," Charlie said. "Chekhov--didn't he die after a last swallow of champagne?"

"It was sad," Margery said. She turned and stared out the side window.

They drove out of town in silence. The cemetery where Margery's father and son were buried was an hour and a half up the coast and midway down a long peninsula. The drive had become an annual event. Margery had no car. Charlie drove her one year and then had just continued. This was,

what, the fourth or fifth trip? He couldn't remember.

"Margery, did you see that picture of President Bush on the carrier deck, wearing the pilot get up?"

"I did."

"Wasn't that ridiculous? The little son of a bitch went AWOL when he was in the National Guard. I read that it delayed the troops their homecoming by a day and cost a million dollars."

"Light comedy," Margery said. "The Emperor Commodus fancied himself a gladiator. Romans had to watch him fight in the colosseum many times. He never lost. His opponents were issued lead swords."

"Nothing's changed," Charlie said. "Commodus?"

"Second century, A.D. We're not a police state, yet. Things get really crazy under one man rule. Have you not read Gibbon?"

"The Decline and Fall--never got around to it."

"Good for perspective," Margery said.

"That green!" Charlie waved at the trees along I-95. "We only get it for a week when the leaves are coming out."

"Yes." Margery settled into her seat. Perspective was a good thing, Charlie thought. Even keel and all that. But there was something to be said for losing it. If he could have his choice of cuties, he'd just as soon have one of those dark eyed Mediterranean fireballs--breasts, slashing smile--someone who spoke with her whole body.

They arrived at the cemetery in good time. Margery declined his offer to carry the special rocks, wanting to bring them herself. They were intended to protect the base of a rugosa she'd planted the previous year. As usual, Charlie accompanied her and then returned to the car. She would take as long as she needed to arrange the rocks and to say or hear or feel whatever she could.

Charlie had no children; it was hard to imagine what she felt. Her son had skidded on a slick road and been wiped out by a logging truck, a stupid accident, pure bad luck. Her father had died later the same year. Margery had been on hold since, he supposed, although he hadn't known her when she was younger. The lines in her face seemed to have been set early. We were all full of hope once, he thought.

He leaned against the car and watched a man approach. The man was carrying a shovel. He had a white handlebar moustache and a vaguely confederate look. "Hey," Charlie said.

"Yup," the man said. He stopped and leaned on his shovel.

"Nice day," Charlie said, after a moment.

"Yessir. Black flies ain't woke up yet."

"Don't disturb them."

"No. Jesus, no. I guess we got a couple of days yet." He tested the ground with the shovel and looked into the cemetery. "Margery Sewell," he said.

"You know Margery?"

"Since she was about so high." He gestured toward his knees. "Used to go smelting with her father, Jack."

"I'm Charlie, friend of Margery's."

"Tucker," the man said. "Tucker Smollett."

"That's an old name."

"Smolletts go way back around here. Smolletts and Sewells, both." They stared into the graveyard. "You from around here, then?" He knew that Charlie was from away; he was being polite.

"Live in Portland, born in New York. Family came over in the famine."

"Well, then." The world divides into people who have been hungry and those who haven't. Charlie felt himself grandfathered into the right camp. It was strange how some people you got along with and some you didn't. "I'll tell you one thing," Tucker said, "there weren't nobody smarter than Margery Sewell ever come out of here. She got prizes, awards--some kind of thing from the governor, even. Whoever he was. Can't recall."

Charlie nodded. "She's a professor--classics--Latin and Greek."

"It don't surprise me," Tucker said.

They talked, from time to time glancing into the graveyard. Tucker was waiting for Margery, Charlie realized. When she appeared, she was walking slowly. Her head was up but her attention was dragging, as though she were pulling part of herself left behind. She was nearly to them before she focused. "Hello, Tucker."

"Hello, Margery."

"Good to see you," she said. "It's been a while."

"Yep. Since the service, I guess." Tucker straightened. He seemed younger.

"Tucker lived up the road from us," she said to Charlie. "He made me the most marvelous rocking horse. I think that was the nicest present I ever got. When William--" She swallowed. "When--I'm sorry." She turned away. "William loved it too," she said in a low voice.

There wasn't anything to say. Margery gathered herself and turned back to them.

Tucker cleared his throat. "I was--thinking you might come over for a bite to eat, for old times sake." Charlie expected Margery to decline, but something in the old man's tone had caught her attention.

"Well, that's nice of you. You have time, don't you, Charlie?"

"Plenty of time." A few years earlier, she had shown him where she lived, not far from the cemetery. "Ride or walk?"

"Ride," Tucker said. "I'll just put this shovel in the shed."

Tucker's house was a weathered collection of gray boxes that were settling away from each other. A reddish dog got down from a couch on the porch and came to meet them. There was white around her muzzle. "Company, Sally. Margery Sewall and her friend, Charlie." The dog received Tucker's hand on her head and greeted them, sniffing each in turn. "Sally don't see as well as she used to--do you girl?" Her tail wagged and she led them to the house.

"You've got bees." Charlie pointed at four hives that stood on 2x4's at the end of a narrow garden.

"Yep. Good year, last year."

"The lilacs are even bigger than I remember," Margery said.

"They keep right on going." Tucker took them through the house and kitchen to a screened back porch. Charlie and Margery sat at a large table while he brought bread, cheese, pickles, salami, mayonnaise, mustard, a bowl of lettuce, and a smaller bowl of radishes. He set plates and three glasses. "I've got beer, water, and--a little milk."

"Beer," Charlie said.

"Margery?"

"Beer."

"Three sodas coming up," Tucker said.

He and Margery reminisced. "Jack had a taste for the good stuff," Tucker said. "Five o'clock, regular. Never minded sharing, did Jack." Charlie ate steadily and accepted another can of beer.

"Not bad, Tucker," he said. He had noticed a small wooden horse on a shelf when he first entered the porch. During lunch, as Tucker and Margery talked, his eyes kept returning to it. He got up and walked over to the shelf. "What's this?"

"Something I made."

"Do you mind if I look at it?"

"Nope."

Charlie carried the horse back to the table. It was carved from wood, light colored, about five inches high, galloping across a base of wooden grasses and flowers. There was an air of health about it. It seemed to belong where it was. "Nice," he said. "What kind of finish is that on there?"

"Nothing much. Linseed oil, thinned some."

"Mighty nice."

"It's beautiful, Tucker."

"I made it for your mother." It was a statement of fact, but it carried something extra, like the horse. "You probably don't remember Mesquite, Margery."

"Mesquite--" Her face began to open.

"Must have died when you were about four or five."

"I'm remembering, now."

"Mr. Randolph brought him back for your mom--Helen," he said. "Got him at a show down south somewhere. He was a quarter horse, Mesquite. From Oklahoma originally, if I remember right. Damn fine horse." Tucker tilted his glass for two swallows. "I used to take care of him once in a while--when the family was away, you know. Well, one day Helen was out riding and I was walking along. It was in June. The flowers was all out. Mesquite got to cantering and I run along to keep up. Never forget it. The flowers all different, blurring together and flowing along like I was running through a river all different colors. And Helen sitting up tall--she had hair just like yours, Margery, short and thick, straw colored, went with her blue eyes." Tucker slowed down. "Well, I had to do something. I made the horse."

"Mesquite."

"Yep."

"Why didn't you give it to her?"

"It's a long story, I guess. Took me a while to make it. Your mom took a fancy to Jack. What with one thing and another, I went in the Navy. When I got out, I guess you was three years old already."

"Oh, Tucker."

"How's she doing? She still in Florida where they went?"

"St. Augustine. She's down to one lung. She lives in one of those--assisted living places, they call them. She has her own space, but there's help if need be. She gets around on a walker." Margery paused.

"Tucker, why do we cling so to life?"

"Guess we ain't done yet."

Margery looked at him for a long moment, and they exchanged what could be exchanged in small smiles. Tucker went inside the house and returned with a heavy cardboard box. "While I'm at it," he said and began taking out carvings and putting them on the table--more horses, deer, squirrels, birds of all kinds, a woodchuck. Charlie held up a fox and looked at it from different angles. Its tail was full, straight out behind him, level with his back. His ears were sharply pointed, his head tilted slightly, all senses alert. Charlie was sure it was a he; the fox was elegant and challenging, superior.

"Damn near alive," Charlie said. "You could make money with these."

Tucker shook his head negatively. "Only do one a year. In the winter, not much going on." He looked into the back yard. "Try to get it done on February 15th."

"Mother's birthday."

"We used to talk about them a lot--animals and birds. Walk in the woods, talk."

"Tucker, does she know about these?"

"Nope."

"But she should see them!"

"She'd like them, you think?"

"Of course she would. They're beautiful."

"I'm not much for writing,"

"I could mail them to her if you'd like." He looked at the carvings, rubbed his chin, and inclined his head. A why not expression crossed his face. He pulled a twenty dollar bill from a scarred black wallet.

"Tucker, for heavens sake!" He insisted that she take it.

"Ask her, if she don't mind--I might take a ride down, say hello. Probably get a train down there." He looked at Charlie.

"Amtrak," Charlie said. "Or you could fly."

"I like trains."

They finished lunch and put the box of carvings on the back seat of the car. "I'll wrap tissue paper around them so they don't get banged up. I'll mail them tomorrow," Margery said. "Tucker, thank you so much for lunch. It was so good to see you."

"I thought I'd be seeing you again one of these days," Tucker said.

"We'll keep in touch," Margery said.

"Take care of yourself," Charlie said. "You want a ride back?"

"I'll walk."

They drove away slowly as Tucker and Sally watched. Tucker lifted one hand in farewell.

"You just never know, do you?" Charlie said.

"Tucker Smollett," Margery said. "Good old Tucker."

Halfway back to Portland, Charlie looked over at Margery and asked about her husband. "He cared for me," she said. "He just cared more for someone else."

"Damn shame," Charlie said. Margery brushed the fingers of one hand through the back of her hair. Charlie thought she was going to say more, but she didn't. At the ferry, he helped her with the box and said goodbye.

The next morning was again bright and sunny. Charlie returned to the bench near the ferry and sat, savoring his coffee, croissant, and the salty air. His brother Orson came to mind. Orson was a pain in the ass, but he had a point--sometimes you have to make a move.

Two men wearing similar clothes--pressed jeans, T-shirts, white running shoes, and sunglasses--walked up and took benches closer to the water. One was older, softer, beginning to put on weight. He sat with his elbows on his knees, looking across the harbor. The other, fitter one, stretched full length on his bench, arms out flat behind his head, and stared into the sky. Neither looked happy. They remained unmoving, as though they were waiting for a delivery.

That is not the way, Charlie thought. He stood, dropped the empty bag and cup into a trash can, and walked in the direction of the unknown furling inside him.

Coming To

"I made a box. It was about so big." The speaker spread his hands on the counter. "By about so wide." He indicated the other dimension, one palm by his stomach, the other out by a napkin holder.

The outer hand rose over a plate of eggs. "About so high."

A smaller man at the next stool nodded, lifting his coffee mug. "About so high."

About so high, Will repeated to himself.

"Made it for my daughter."

"For your daughter."

Made it for his daughter. Will joined the chorus. He couldn't see the box, but he could hear it.

"Took me some shiplap--nice and dry. Made her tight. No cracks."

"No sir."

No way.

It was four o'clock in the morning. Fluorescent lights cast a bluish glow over wooden booths, plastic covered stools, the grill, and a double doored refrigerator. A waitress leaned against the wall by a kitchen door and lit a cigarette.

The man's voice rose and fell. There was a question of hinging. To

hinge or not. Maybe a plain top with a handle? A hinge, but--you didn't want the top just flopping around. "I got me some light brass chain, put about fifteen inches on each side, inside, running to the underside of the top. Little screw in each end. Not going to pull out \_those\_ hinges."

The other man shook his head.

"I sanded her up good--you know--finished it nice."

The waitress bent forward and tapped her cigarette on an ashtray hidden behind the counter. "You want more coffee, Herbert?"

"Don't believe I will." Herbert turned to his friend. "What do you say?"

"Don't get paid for sitting."

They left and the waitress cleared their places, sweeping a tip into her pocket. She turned toward Will. "More coffee?"

He pushed his mug forward. "Thanks." He could see the box now. It was solid. It had a quiet glow.

"Long night?"

"Yes." It hurt to think about it. He was still disoriented. The diner had appeared in the night like a miracle. "We all got troubles, I guess," he said to break the silence.

"What's her name?"

"Heidi," he said, surprised. The name tore through him.

"Heidi, huh." The waitress took a drag from her cigarette. "You're a good looking guy. She good looking?"

He could have said, not like you, but he didn't have it in him. He nodded.

"It's hard sometimes," she said. "I don't mean to be telling you what to do, but you might feel better if you cleaned up a little, got those pieces of leaf or whatever out of your hair." Will reached up and felt the back of his head.

"I slept in the woods a couple of hours."

"You look it. Your mother'd give you hell."

"Don't have a mother."

"Oh. I \_am\_ a nosy bitch."

"You're not a bitch," Will said. It was important to get something right. "You're not a bitch. I was at a concert. We were."

"You and Heidi."

"And a bunch of her friends. It was at Cornell. String quartet. I had to wear a tie."



"Guess you got rid of the tie."

"It's in the car--with the rest of the uniform. I'm in the service, the Air Force. Only dress up clothes I had."

"My brother was in the Navy twenty years. Gets a check now, every month."

"I won't make twenty."

"I've never been to a quartet," she said. "Cornell is big bucks."

"The music was great. Haydn. But her friends were laughing at me. What's Heidi doing with an airman? They don't see too many airmen at Cornell. We've been together since we were fifteen--high school."

"Oh, Jesus," the waitress said, "first time's the worst."

"She didn't say anything, but I saw it in her eyes--just like I saw she was going to be mine when I asked her in the hallway to go roller skating." Will shook his head. "I didn't even know how to roller skate. She looked down and then she looked up and her eyes said yes and then she said, yes. And that was that. Five years ago."

The waitress took a last drag and stubbed out her cigarette. "You want something to eat?"

"I don't think so."

"You sure? Piece of toast?"

"Well--toast, maybe." Heidi's friends surrounded him. Their faces were soft and excited, sure of themselves. They wore expensive sweaters and sports jackets. They seemed to belong to a club where everything was taken care of.

The waitress set a plate of toast in front of him. He took one bite and then another. "Tastes good."

"You gotta eat," she said.

"I drank a lot of beer, after. Heidi had to go back to her dorm. I was on this path near where the car was parked, and I just lay down in the path. When I woke up, there was a roaring and a weird light in the trees. It was a power plant or something that fired up in the middle of the night. I couldn't sleep, so I found the car. I just wanted to get out of there."

"Get moving," she said. "I know it's easy to say--but it might be it's for the best. People do go in different directions."

"Maybe," Will said. "Maybe she'll marry one of those rich guys and live happily ever after."

The sky outside the window had turned from black to light gray. "Getting light." He left a ten dollar bill on the counter. "Thanks for the company."

"You stop in next time by, you hear?"

"O.K. What's your name?"

"Lee."

"O.K., Lee. I'll do that. I'm Will. Take it easy."

The car started right up, that was one good thing. He drove off, adjusting the rear view mirror, catching a glimpse of the diner before he went around a curve. He and Heidi had made a whole, and now she was gone. He drove, and, as the daylight grew stronger, he thought about the diner--that little room of light in the dark, Lee, and the man talking about his box. That was something you could hang on to.

## Guayaquil

At the sound of wooden blocks struck together, Arthur adjusted his sitting position and emptied his mind. The echo diminished to a memory and changed to a tree. A palm tree. Not this again. An expanse of empty beach curved to a familiar headland. Sometimes his grandmother would appear, coming toward him on her fitness walk, legs moving quickly, scarcely bending at the knees, like the birds that chased and retreated at the water's edge. She never noticed him.

This morning Penn stepped from the water and approached, his long thin body tanned ivory brown, his eyes blue-green, clear as a cat's. Things came easy to Penn. Arthur exhaled the past and inhaled it again. Not that way, he told himself. No struggle. Let it float away. He straightened and followed his breathing. Penn disappeared as casually as he had twenty years ago.

Arthur put his cheek against the palm tree. The bark was like cloth, raspy and flexible, wrapped around and around the heart of the tree. Someday, years of balmy weather would be violently interrupted. This tree, which grew in sand, would have to bend horizontal or be uprooted.

Arthur exhaled the satisfaction that attended this insight. No attachment.

When the blocks sounded again, he stood and walked with the others around the zendo, careful not to look at Martin for approval. He wasn't sure why Martin was hard on him. Martin was enlightened, but wisdom hadn't erased narrow lines in his face, resentful lines. Arthur was respected in the scientific community, well paid. Martin had been an insurance adjuster or something before he found his vocation. He had shaved his head, but the cheap haircut remained.

The blocks signalled and sitting resumed, the group settling into a shared breathing. A quiet euphoria rose and faded, replaced by an edgy pre-verbal clarity. Kwok! Over. Arthur rejoined the world of choice and demand. He felt that he was making progress.

"Excuse me." The elderly woman who had been directly in front of him as

they walked around the room was blocking his way. "Are you Arthur Wells? Dr. Arthur Wells?"

"Why, yes." He raised his eyebrows modestly.

"Forgive me for intruding," she said. "My niece insisted that I ask. She saw you last week when she picked me up. She thinks she had a seminar with you once."

"Oh dear. I hope I wasn't difficult. What is your niece's name?"

"Pookie."

Arthur's mouth filled with the taste of anchovies.

"Pookie," he said. "Really? Your niece. Some time ago, I think." The woman waited. "Pookie, umm--her last name?"

"Willet, now. It was Kennecutt."

"Yes, of course! I remember now," Arthur said, falsely triumphant. "I thought she had great promise." He tossed his hands. "But--life--who knows?" He smiled acceptance.

"She married an idiot."

"Ah," Arthur said. She hadn't married Penn, at any rate.

"On the positive side, they have two wonderful children."

Only children don't get to be uncles. "Lucky Auntie," Arthur said. "Do give her my best. There's biology and then there's biology."

"Yes," she said. "Well, I must be going." Arthur watched her leave, wishing for a drink of water. He was fifteen years older than Penn, and Penn was a lot older than Pookie; it was absurd to be jealous. They did make a handsome couple. At least they had the one time they'd driven by in an old Porsche with the top down--Penn talking, his head turned to Pookie. He was still youthful. If anyone could manage a relationship with a big age difference it would be Penn. No doubt he worked in a hospital or a clinic surrounded by women. I forgive myself for giving her a B, Arthur thought. It should have been a C, but he had been unnecessarily cold with her in class. Let it go.

He emerged from his thoughts too late. "Chop wood, carry water," Martin said and launched into an explanation of the latest fund drive.

"Of course," Arthur said. "After the I.R.S., my gambling debts, the Sierra Club, and Psi Upsilon, you shall have everything."

"Thank you, Arthur. We know we can count on you. You have been a great help to the zendo."

"Chop wood, carry water," Arthur said, trying to remember where he'd parked the Land Rover. He walked away trustingly and turned at the corner. There it was, by the bodega near the end of the block. He lowered the car windows and sat listening to mariachi music pouring from the store.

The beat was attractive, maddening. It made him want to be a part of things, to dance in the town square. He worked hard. But. He never had any--fun. The word caught in his throat, emerged, and hung before him like the coast of Antarctica. He gripped the steering wheel. Mother had been on him about that earlier. \_You ought to go out and have a good time, Arthur. Never mind those science trips.\_ Mother specialized in good times. Her round of social events would drive him crazy. He was content to see her alone at their weekly breakfast. Quite content. In fact, meditation was helpful after breakfast with Mother. He remembered to exhale, and he loosened his grip on the wheel.

Trumpets blared above guitars. It was a sunny day, a good day to be outside. He started the car and drove away. When he reached the intersection where he normally turned toward home, he steered right and then impulsively left, veering back into the traffic going straight ahead. Someone leaned on his horn and passed him, too close. The driver turned his head. Arthur could see his mouth moving but couldn't hear the words. Fucking something something something. It hadn't been that dangerous. Amazing how people need to get angry, be righteous.

"Get a life," Arthur said. The man cut in front of him. A bumper sticker declared: "My Kid Beat Up Your Honor Student." I could knock him right off the road, Arthur thought. His mood brightened, and he floored the gas pedal. "Don't mess with honor students," he said, roaring past. He reached for the radio and found a Spanish music station.

Gambling debts--what a laugh. He had been to two conventions in Vegas and never gambled once. Give your money to a casino? Stupid. The flow of traffic carried him to the edge of the city. He kept going and then turned toward the mountains. The higher he drove, the better he felt. He had lived entirely in California except for business trips and visits to his father in Hawaii. His life spread out behind him, below him, as he climbed toward Nevada. He stopped for gas, looked at the stands of Douglas fir, and decided to spend the night in Tahoe.

He was pleased when he coasted into town. The lake was clear blue. The streets were impersonal and commercial; he had credit cards; he knew the rules. He signed for a room and strolled down the main street, his small notebook and pen secure in his jacket pocket. The air was sharper. Winter was coming, very different up here. He looked around for a place to eat.

"Got any spare change?" The meaning of the words and the sound of the voice were like light blows to opposite sides of his head. He turned, disoriented. "Hey, Art," Penn said.

"Is that you, Penn?" Arthur struggled to reconcile the young man in his mind with the man in front of him. Penn's hair was thinning. He needed a shave.

"Indeed so. You are looking a bit crazed, Arthur. You need a drink to acclimatize."

"I just got here." Penn seemed to know that. "I--maybe you're right. Will you join me?"

"I could force down a single-malt."

"Lead the way. It's good to see you, Penn." They sat at the end of a polished bar in one of the smaller casinos.

"Feels strange to sit on a bar stool," Arthur said.

"You get used to it. As an ex-doc, let me toast your health."

"Thank you. And yours." There was a moment of silence--appreciation for the Glenlivet and a chance to think back.

"I've seen notice of you in the papers now and then," Penn said.  
"Distinguished career and all that."

"Same old stuff. I untangled a couple of mysteries about smells and flavors."

"Chip off the old block. Your father was a biologist."

"Still is," Arthur said. "Marine. He got fish; I got plants."

"Could make for conversation at a seafood place," Penn said.

"If we ate out. If we talked."

"I remember that trip we took to Hawaii. He didn't say much. Nice guy, though, over on the windward side in--what was the name?"

"Lanikai."

"Right, Lanikai."

"So, what about you? I guess you gave up medicine."

"Yeah. It was a cruise, learning, but when I got to doing it--I don't know--all that misery. I ducked into management. That was worse. Boring. I chucked it for the business game, the market." He paused.  
"You know how they used to say: sometimes you get the bear; sometimes the bear gets you." He flashed the old Penn smile.

"Where are you living these days?"

"One of my buddies has a boat on the lake. He's not using it right now."

"Getting cool, isn't it?"

"Just right," Penn said, "for another couple of months." Arthur didn't want to ask: then what?"

"Then what?" Penn said. He finished his drink. "It's O.K. to ask. I don't know." He leaned toward Arthur. "Do me a favor, Arthur--try saying, out loud: I don't know." Arthur hesitated. "Come on now."

"I don't know," Arthur said and found himself smiling.

"You see," Penn said. "It's not a bad state." They had another round.

"I saw you once--driving by with one of my students."

"Pookie," Penn said. "I should have gotten in touch, but I thought

you'd disapprove."

"She wasn't the brightest," Arthur said. "Attractive, though."

"Pookie could drink! Loved to swim, good dancer. How's your love life? Any little Arthurs around?"

"No."

"Me neither. I did have some step-kids for a while." Penn's expression lifted. "That was a good thing."

"When was that?"

"Let's see--about four years ago, now."

"Where are they?"

"Oakland. Sergio, Consuela, and Esperanza. What a crew."

"And their mother?"

"Gorgeous. Constanza. I met her on a bus in Guayaquil."

"Guayaquil?"

"I was just back from the Galapagos. Remember, we talked about going there sometime."

"Blue-footed boobys," Arthur said.

"Exactly," Penn said. "And the tortoises. Amazing! I was in the money. I took a couple of months to go down and check out some of the places we lived when I was a kid. My Spanish came back. Had a good time. Anyway, I was on a city bus when Constanza got on with the kids. The bus was full, so I gave her my seat. The kids were crawling all over her. She had that long black hair, you know, red cheeks, bright eyes, one of those solid bodies for the ages--we started joking around, made a date to meet at a park the next day. Have you been there?"

"Never have."

"You can imagine--hot, steamy, crowded, flowers everywhere. We had fun, the five of us. She turned out to be smart, full of life. She'd just come from Quito and was trying to find work and a place to live. She was staying with a cousin and running out of money."

"The father was in Quito?"

"Yes. A hell of a thing. He was from a family that had been there for centuries. I guess he and Constanza got into it when they were very young. The family allowed her to stay on one of their properties, paid all the bills. She kept having babies. The situation changed, and she was let go. I don't know whether the guy was tired of her or whether he married or took a position in the family empire that wouldn't allow the arrangement or what."

"Terrible," Arthur said.

"Constanza was sad, but she wasn't bitter. She loved him. She was from a poor family, and she had a good life for a while--that's how she looked at it. When she told me the story I thought, for once in your life, be useful. I married her. In a couple of months we were all set up in California, kids in school learning English, the whole trip."

"Incredible," Arthur said.

"It was fine for a few years. Then I got restless. The kids kept us going, but the relationship was out of gas. I didn't know what to do. I had cash flow problems. But I got lucky and made a good call in the market. I figured I'd better change things while I could, so I told Constanza that we were going to take a vacation in Quito. Took her and the kids, and, as soon as we got there, I explained that I had to leave the marriage. I gave her all the money I had, enough to buy her a house and get her started. You know what she said? 'No way! We're going back to California.' She took the money, and two weeks later she and the kids were back in the city. She rented a place in Oakland. Still there, I'm pretty sure."

"Are you in touch?"

"Not really. She's got a new life. It would confuse the kids. I worry about them sometimes. Not Constanza, she's strong, good looking--she'll do fine. But the kids--I used to take Esperanza to school on a bike, pulled her behind me on a little cart." He looked at Arthur and shook his head. "Maybe later on, when I get ahead a little bit."

"They're better off for what you did."

"I hope so. I guess so." He held up his glass. "Another?"

"Let's get something to eat," Arthur said. Penn pulled out his wallet. "On me," Arthur said.

"Good man. You got something to write on?" He took a worn business card from his wallet and copied into Arthur's notebook an address written on the back of the card. And the names: Constanza, Sergio, Consuela, and Esperanza. "It's a hell of a favor to ask," he said, but could you check up on them sometime, for me." His voice dropped. "See if they need anything?" He looked up helplessly.

"I will."

It was as close as they had come to acknowledging the bond between them. Arthur took a deep breath. "How will I reach you?"

"I'll look you up at the university--you'll be there, adding to the body of scientific knowledge."

"I suppose so," Arthur said. "Trying anyway."

"Good old Art, slow and steady wins the race."

They had a couple of steaks, split a Caesar salad, and drank wine while they talked about old times and the state of the world. Penn explained craps and convinced Arthur to try his luck. People who play with me get the rolls, he told Arthur. They bought two hundred dollars worth of chips. Penn insisted that Arthur place the bet, but they waited until

the dice were passed to a middle-aged blonde. "She's lucky," Penn said.

The dice skittered and rolled to a seven. Loud cheers. Arthur was forty dollars richer. They played for nearly an hour. Arthur was instructed to bet lightly unless Lucky was throwing. He was six hundred dollars ahead when the food and drink and the long day began to get to him. "Time to turn in," he told Penn.

"Where you staying?"

"Harrah's."

"How about coffee in the morning?" They arranged to meet in the café at ten.

"Here," Arthur handed Penn his chips. "A stake."

"Right on. What do you say, Lucky, want to look around a little?" Lucky shrugged agreeably and Penn put his arm around her shoulders. "You get half the winnings in the morning," he said to Arthur.

"No need," Arthur said. "It's on the house."

"No, no. See you at ten." He and Lucky walked away. Penn looked back once and smiled. Same old Penn.

The night air was clear and crisp. People on the sidewalks seemed to be enjoying themselves. Arthur went to his room and fell asleep immediately, but he did not sleep well. He kept waking and seeing Penn's smile--amused, helpless, oddly gallant. He had a premonition that he might not see him again.

In the morning, Arthur waited an hour, but Penn didn't show up. He walked back to Harrah's and checked out. The desk clerk gave him five casino silver dollars--"Our way of saying thank you, Sir."

Arthur stopped at a slot machine near the exit and dropped the dollars in, pulling the long handle and waiting after each one. He looked down the rows of machines at other gamblers with their arms in the same position. Sometimes you win; mostly you lose. In the end you lose. That's what Penn got from the place--that truth, underscored.

Sure, you can quit when you're ahead. But then you're out of the game; you're not playing. That's what I've done with my life, he thought. But he would lose too, in the end. Maybe the best strategy was to pass along the winnings, if you had any, the way he had last night. Penn had done that in Guayaquil--a good thing, as he'd put it--although he hadn't finished the job. Probably wouldn't, either, the way his life was going. Arthur felt for his notebook and Constanza's address. That was at least something he could do, for himself and for Penn--he could help those kids. That was something, anyway.

Bells and sirens exploded in the next aisle. Jackpot. An elderly woman stared at flashing lights, bemused, a bit bewildered. Arthur realized that tears were running down his face, that he was both sad and grateful, and that it was time to leave.



## Four Pictures and a Flower Thief

I have these pictures--two in fog, two in sun. Fog: a man in a deck chair is playing a trumpet, his feet on the stern railing of a ferry. Fog: a telephone pole seen through a windshield. Sun: a young woman on a bicycle is climbing a cobblestoned street, blonde hair bouncing, white blouse, solid breasts. Sun: a snake falling back to the bank of a stream, a dragonfly in its mouth, dazzling, iridescent.

Put in a certain order, riffled through, they make a silent movie--until sounds grow more insistent. A Jeep honks twice, accelerating past the biker, driver and passenger turning to look. She ignores them. She doesn't notice me watching from a doorway. I suppose my heart leaping toward her made no sound. She was locked into my blood and bone before I knew any words for her, her name even. The shock of recognition left me wide-eyed and strangely blind. Nothing would be seen for itself, only in terms of her--whether she was there or not, how likely it was that she might appear, how \_not her\_ everything else.

Nantucket is ten miles long with one central town. I worked in a restaurant on the main street. The following day I saw her stop at a bakery/cafe which became my hangout. When she came in again, my throat went dry and my knees shook. I don't remember what I first said to her, but she responded to some sort of signal. She was willing for me to pay more attention. We began to meet in the cafe.

It is hard not to put what I know now into what I knew then. I presented what plumage I had--no money, but a small currency of integrity. I had survived childhood by learning to please. Eventually, I could no longer do that and I started over, was reborn at nineteen. While I was only five, by that count, when Jamie (her name) pedaled up the main street of Nantucket, I was uncompromised; I offered myself for whatever waited inside that white blouse.

One wet morning, she agreed to a picnic on my next day off. I stood in the bakery entrance and listened to water running from the roofs and downspouts, down the sidewalk and street. It didn't matter that I would be soaked by the time I got to my room. Nothing mattered except that we had a date. Because we had a date--were together already, really--the universe made sense. The rain fell equally on us all, rich kids with Jeeps, waitresses, cooks, masons and roofers, the young and the old. It's raining, I said to myself. The words meant more than they did before. It's raining, I said again. All over the town.

Harry, the chef, made a mixture of spices for me. He handed me a plastic bag and told me to shake a swordfish steak in the bag and not to broil the fish too long. She'll never forget you, he said without smiling. Harry cooked breakfast at the Gray Gull and lunch and dinner at The Upper Deck, a sixteen hour day. Our relationship was respectful. Eight hours a day was enough for me, but while I was working I did my best. When Harry, under stress, snapped at me, I learned to hear him say, "Take another shrimp, Joe." Cocktail shrimp, waiting in the cooler, out of sight from the grill. I acquired a reputation for good humor.

I borrowed my buddy Morgan's truck on a clear evening in late July and

picked up Jamie. Madaket was her favorite beach, less known, wilder. We drove out and made a driftwood fire, opened a bottle of wine, and talked as the sun went down and the moon rose. We were easy with each other by then, although we had never touched, let alone hugged or kissed. The swordfish was a success. The moon sent its ivory path over the wave tops, inviting and promising. Jamie told me how she liked to swim that path and how, several times, she nearly hadn't made it back. We were young.

I was giddy with accomplishment as we finished a second bottle of wine. She was wearing a tight T-shirt and shorts, apparently unaware of the effect her body had on me as she told me about her parents and her friends on the island. She had summered on Nantucket for years. She was in a suspended state--too heavy for ballet, too young for graduate school. She did not want to marry an engineer and live in a suburb of Philadelphia. She was clear about that. I offered a possible alternative: an honest life built one stone at a time.

We put out the fire and walked along the beach. Fog blew in, softening the lines of the horizon and dune, thickening as we reached the truck. We drove back happily involved with each other, unconcerned with anything else. A telephone pole appeared directly in front of me. I whipped the steering wheel to the left and almost missed the pole. The right headlight smashed and I was thrown against the wheel, striking it with my shoulder and bending it nearly double. Jamie went through the windshield. After the crash, there were only hot sounds of metal uncrinkling and moans from Jamie. Don't let me die, she was saying over and over.

I pulled her back on to the seat and reassured her. Her hair was bloody and glinted with broken glass. She was half-conscious. I took her in my arms and walked away from the wreck. We were at a tiny unmarked traffic circle with a house nearby. Lights were on in the house. I carried Jamie to the front door which was opened by a woman who had heard the crash. I waited while she spread newspapers on the floor, and then I brought Jamie inside. An ambulance came within a few minutes and took her to the hospital. I was taken to the police station to answer questions.

She was all right, thank God, after a few days in the hospital. Some dental work, a small scar. I had bruises. We got off easy. Morgan's truck was totaled. The cop was tired and made a typo on the accident form. I paid a fine and didn't even get a mark on my out of state license. The little traffic circle was notorious, I learned. I went back and nailed reflectors all over the place.

Every afternoon I visited Jamie in the hospital, and we became close. Two days after she was released and life was getting back to normal, I took a walk during the break between lunch and dinner. Things had been happening fast; I needed to slow down. I followed a stream through a marshy area to a dry bank shaded by a tree where I stretched out and listened to the sounds of birds and insects. It was hot and the sounds began to still. A dragonfly darted back and forth above the stream. Movement caught my eye. A snake, three feet long, was winding along the opposite bank, unhurried, almost casual. A dark snake, unremarkable. It struck, too fast to see. It was falling back to the ground before I could focus, the dragonfly in its mouth. The snake caught the dragonfly in midair without coiling. Impossible. The most athletic move I've ever seen. It was as though the universe had stopped, allowed the snake to

strike, and then started again for everyone else.

We made plans, Jamie and I, to be together in the fall in the mountains. I turned down a flattering offer to follow Harry to a hunting lodge in New Hampshire and from there to Florida for the winter season. I had a different future. Jamie was coming.

I caught the ferry to Woods Hole on a foggy morning. It was chilly; the passengers stayed inside. I went out on deck and heard jazz coming from the stern. A man with his feet up on a chair was playing a trumpet pointed toward the ocean and an American flag fluttering in the fog. He played freely, a concert for the two of us, a farewell to the island and summer.

Jamie arrived for a day several weeks later. When I put her on the bus to Philadelphia to go home for her stuff, life was bright. I met her bus that weekend, but she wasn't on it. A terrible emptiness spread through me.

We wrote to each other for a year. She did, eventually, step down from that bus. Two weeks later I put her back on. It had all been a kind of sexual mirage, a passion that had nothing to do with who she was. Watch out when your throat goes dry and you begin to shake!

We each have a type--someone visually our lost other self, male or female. I've seen a few since, always blonde, earthy and radiant at the same time, a particular combination. But they don't affect me the same way. I shake my head and say, there's another one.

"What happened to Jamie?" W.cat and I were sitting on a bench that looked out toward the White Mountains.

"She married into a wealthy Boston family. She escaped Philadelphia. Thirty-five years ago. What did we know?"

"Not much," W.cat said. "Shall we go?"

As we were walking through the West End, she pointed to a poppy that had fallen over on the grass at the edge of a flower bed. We crossed the lawn, and she held up the blossom while I looked around for gardeners and German shepherds; W.cat is sometimes unable to resist flowers. The poppy had four unusually large petals, deep lavender, each bearing a dark, nearly black, irregular circle. It might have been a hall of flags or a gallery of abstract sunsets, regal and empty, waiting for its visitors. I suppose it is the fleetingness of life that makes us story tellers and flower thieves.

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