Oh, Joseph, I’m So Tired

When Franklin D. Roosevelt was President-elect there must have been sculptors all over America who wanted a chance to model his head from life, but my mother had connections. One of her closest friends and neighbors, in the Greenwich Village courtyard where we lived, was an amiable man named Howard Whitman who had recently lost his job as a reporter on the New York Post. And one of Howard’s former colleagues from the Post was now employed in the press office of Roosevelt’s New York headquarters. That would make it easy for her to get in—or, as she said, to get an entrée—and she was confident she could take it from there. She was confident about everything she did in those days, but it never quite disguised a terrible need for support and approval on every side.

She wasn’t a very good sculptor. She had been working at it for only three years, since breaking up her marriage to my father, and there was still something stiff and amateurish about her pieces. Before the Roosevelt project her specialty had been “garden figures”—a life-size little boy whose legs turned into the legs of a goat at the knees and another who knelt among ferns to play the pipes of Pan; little girls who trailed chains of daisies from their upraised arms or walked beside a spread-winged goose. These fanciful children, in plaster painted green to simulate weathered bronze, were arranged on homemade wooden pedestals to loom around her studio and to leave a cleared space in the middle for the modeling stand that held whatever she was working on in clay.

Her idea was that any number of rich people, all of them gracious
and aristocratic, would soon discover her: they would want her sculpture to decorate their landscaped gardens, and they would want to make her their friend for life. In the meantime, a little nationwide publicity as the first woman sculptor to "do" the President-elect certainly wouldn't hurt her career.

And, if nothing else, she had a good studio. It was, in fact, the best of all the studios she would have in the rest of her life. There were six or eight old houses facing our side of the courtyard, with their backs to Bedford Street, and ours was probably the showplace of the row because the front room on its ground floor was two stories high. You went down a broad set of brick steps to the tall front windows and the front door; then you were in the high, wide, light-floored studio. It was big enough to serve as a living room too, and so along with the green garden children it contained all the living-room furniture from the house we'd lived in with my father in the suburban town of Hastings-on-Hudson, where I was born. A second-floor balcony ran along the far end of the studio, with two small bedrooms and a tiny bathroom tucked away upstairs; beneath that, where the ground floor continued through to the Bedford Street side, lay the only part of the apartment that might let you know we didn't have much money. The ceiling was very low and it was always dark in there; the small windows looked out underneath an iron sidewalk grating, and the bottom of that street cavity was thick with strewn garbage. Our roach-infested kitchen was barely big enough for a stove and sink that were never clean, and for a brown wooden icebox with its dark, ever-melting block of ice; the rest of that area was our dining room, and not even the amplitude of the old Hastings dining-room table could brighten it. But our Majestic radio was in there too, and made it a cozy place for my sister Edith and me: we liked the children's programs that came on in the late afternoons.

We had just turned off the radio one day when we went out into the studio and found our mother discussing the Roosevelt project with Howard Whitman. It was the first we'd heard of it, and we must have interrupted her with too many questions because she said, "Edith? Billy? That's enough, now. I'll tell you all about this later. Run out in the garden and play."

She always called the courtyard "the garden," though nothing grew there except a few stunted city trees and a patch of grass that never had a chance to spread. Mostly it was bald earth, interrupted here and there by brick paving, lightly powdered with soot and scattered with the droppings of dogs and cats. It may have been six or eight houses long, but it was only two houses wide, which gave it a hemmed-in, cheerless look; its only point of interest was a dilapidated marble fountain, not much bigger than a birdbath, which stood near our house. The original idea of the fountain was that water would drip evenly from around the rim of its upper tier and tinkle into its lower basin, but age had unsettled it; the water spilled in a single rope stream from the only inch of the upper tier's rim that stayed clean. The lower basin was deep enough to soak your feet in on a hot day, but there wasn't much pleasure in that because the underwater part of the marble was coated with brown scum.

My sister and I found things to do in the courtyard every day, for all of the two years we lived there, but that was only because Edith was an imaginative child. She was eleven at the time of the Roosevelt project, and I was seven.

"Daddy?" she asked in our father's office uptown one afternoon.

"Have you heard Mommy's doing a head of President Roosevelt?"

"Oh?" He was rummaging in his desk, looking for something he'd said we might like.

"She's going to take his measurements and stuff here in New York," Edith said, "and then after the Inauguration, when the sculpture's done, she's going to take it to Washington and present it to him in the White House." Edith often told one of our parents about the other's more virtuous activities; it was part of her long, hopeful effort to bring them back together. Many years later she told me she thought she had never recovered, and never would, from the shock of their breakup: she said Hastings-on-Hudson remained the happiest time of her life, and that made me envious because I could scarcely remember it at all.

"Well," my father said. "That's really something, isn't it." Then he found what he'd been looking for in the desk and said, "Here we go; what do you think of these?" They were two fragile perforated sheets of what looked like postage stamps, each stamp bearing the insignia of an electric lightbulb in vivid white against a yellow background, and the words "More light."

My father's office was one of many small cubicles on the twenty-third floor of the General Electric building. He was an assistant regional sales manager in what was then called the Mazzla Lamp
Division—a modest job, but good enough to have allowed him to rent into a town like Hastings-on-Hudson in better times—and these “More light” stamps were souvenirs of a recent sales convention. We told him the stamps were neat—and they were—but expressed some doubt as to what we might do with them.

“Oh, they’re just for decoration,” he said. “I thought you could paste them into your schoolbooks, or—you know—whatever you want. Ready to go?” And he carefully folded the sheets of stamps and put them in his inside pocket for safekeeping on the way home.

Between the subway exit and the courtyard, somewhere in the West Village, we always walked past a vacant lot where men stood huddled around weak fires built of broken fruit crates and trash, some of them warming tin cans of food held by coat-hanger wire over the flames. “Don’t stare,” my father had said the first time. “All those men are out of work, and they’re hungry.”

“Daddy?” Edith inquired. “Do you think Roosevelt’s good?”

“Sure I do.”

“Do you think all the Democrats are good?”

“Well, most of ’em, sure.”

Much later I would learn that my father had participated in local Democratic Party politics for years. He had served some of his political friends—men my mother described as dreadful little Irish people from Tammany Hall—by helping them to establish Mazda Lamp distributorships in various parts of the city. And he loved their social gatherings, at which he was always asked to sing.

“Well, of course, you’re too young to remember Daddy’s singing,” Edith said to me once after his death in 1942.

“No, I’m not; I remember.”

“But I mean really remember,” she said. “He had the most beautiful tenor voice I’ve ever heard. Remember ‘Danny Boy’?”

“Sure.”

“Ah, God, that was something,” she said, closing her eyes. “That was really—that was really something.”

When we got back to the courtyard that afternoon, and back into the studio, Edith and I watched our parents say hello to each other. We always watched that closely, hoping they might drift into conversation and sit down together and find things to laugh about, but they never did. And it was even less likely than usual that day because my mother had a guest—a woman named Sloane Cabot who was her best friend in the courtyard, and who greeted my father with a little rush of false, flirtatious enthusiasm.

“How’ve you been, Sloane?” he said. Then he turned back to his former wife and said, “Helen? I hear you’re planning to make a bust of Roosevelt.”

“Well, not a bust,” she said. “A head. I think it’ll be more effective if I cut it off at the neck.”

“Well, good. That’s fine. Good luck with it. Okay, then.” He gave his whole attention to Edith and me. “Okay. See you soon. How about a hug?”

And those hugs of his, the climax of his visitation rights, were unforgettable. One at a time we would be swept up and pressed hard into the smells of linen and whiskey and tobacco; the warm rasp of his jaw would graze one cheek and there would be a quick moist kiss near the ear; then he’d let us go.

He was almost all the way out of the courtyard, almost out in the street, when Edith and I went racing after him.

“Daddy! Daddy! You forgot the stamps!”

He stopped and turned around, and that was when we saw he was crying. He tried to hide it—he put his face nearly into his armpit as if that might help him search his inside pocket—but there is no way to disguise the awful bloat and pucker of a face in tears.

“Here,” he said. “Here you go.” And he gave us the least convincing smile I had ever seen. It would be good to report that we stayed and talked to him—that we hugged him again—but we were too embarrassed for that. We took the stamps and ran home without looking back.

“Oh, aren’t you excited, Helen?” Sloane Cabot was saying. “To be meeting him, and talking to him and everything, in front of all those reporters?”

“Well, of course,” my mother said, “but the important thing is to get the measurements right. I hope there won’t be a lot of photographers and silly interruptions.”

Sloane Cabot was some years younger than my mother, and strikingly pretty in a style often portrayed in what I think are called Art Deco illustrations of that period: straight dark bangs, big eyes, and a big mouth. She too was a divorced mother, though her former
husband had vanished long ago and was referred to only as "that bastard" or "that cowardly son of a bitch." Her only child was a boy of Edith's age named John, whom Edith and I liked enormously.

The two women had met within days of our moving into the courtyard, and their friendship was sealed when my mother solved the problem of John's schooling. She knew a Hastings-on-Hudson family who would appreciate the money earned from taking in a boarder, so John went up there to live and go to school, and came home only on weekends. The arrangement cost more than Sloane could comfortably afford, but she managed to make ends meet and was forever grateful.

Sloane worked in the Wall Street district as a private secretary. She talked a lot about how she hated her job and her boss, but the good part was that her boss was often out of town for extended periods; that gave her time to use the office typewriter in pursuit of her life's ambition, which was to write scripts for the radio.

She once confided to my mother that she'd made up both of her names: "Sloane" because it sounded masculine, the kind of name a woman alone might need for making her way in the world, and "Cabot" because—well, because it had a touch of class. Was there anything wrong with that?

"Oh, Helen," she said. "This is going to be wonderful for you. If you get the publicity—if the papers pick it up, and the newsreels—you'll be one of the most interesting personalities in America."

Five or six people were gathered in the studio on the day my mother came home from her first visit with the President-elect.

"Will somebody get me a drink?" she asked, looking around in mock helplessness. "Then I'll tell you all about it."

And with the drink in her hand, with her eyes as wide as a child's, she told us how a door had opened and two big men had brought him in.

"Big men," she insisted. "Young, strong men, holding him up under the arms, and you could see how they were straining. Then you saw this foot come out, with these awful metal braces on the shoe, and then the other foot. And he was sweating, and he was panting for breath, and his face was—I don't know—all bright and tense and horrible." She shuddered.

"Well," Howard Whitman said, looking uneasy, "he can't help being crippled, Helen."

"Howard," she said impatiently, "I'm only trying to tell you how ugly it was." And that seemed to carry a certain weight. If she was an authority on beauty—on how a little boy might kneel among ferns to play the pipes of Pan, for example—then surely she had earned her credentials as an authority on ugliness.

"Anyway," she went on, "they got him into a chair, and he wiped most of the sweat off his face with a handkerchief—he was still out of breath—and after a while he started talking to some of the other men there; I couldn't follow that part of it. Then finally he turned to me with this smile of his. Honestly, I don't know if I can describe that smile. It isn't something you can see in the newsreels; you have to be there. His eyes don't change at all, but the corners of his mouth go up as if they're being pulled by puppet strings. It's a frightening smile. It makes you think: this could be a dangerous man. This could be an evil man. Well anyway, we started talking, and I spoke right up to him. I said, 'I didn't vote for you, Mr. President.' I said, 'I'm a good Republican and I voted for President Hoover.' He said, 'Why are you here, then?' or something like that, and I said, 'Because you have a very interesting head.' So he gave me the smile again and he said, 'What's interesting about it?' And I said, 'I like the bumps on it.'"

By then she must have assumed that every reporter in the room was writing in his notebook, while the photographers got their flashbulbs ready; tomorrow's papers might easily read:

**Gal Sculptor Twists FDR About "Bumps" on Head**

At the end of her preliminary chat with him she got down to business, which was to measure different parts of his head with her calipers. I knew how that felt: the cold, trembling points of those clay-encrusted calipers had tickled and poked me all over during the times I'd served as model for her fey little woodland boys.

But not a single flashbulb went off while she took and recorded the measurements, and nobody asked her any questions; after a few nervous words of thanks and goodbye she was out in the corridor again among all the hopeless, craning people who couldn't get in. It must have been a bad disappointment, and I imagine she tried to make up for it by planning the triumphant way she'd tell us about it when she got home.

"Helen?" Howard Whitman inquired, after most of the other visitors had gone. "Why'd you tell him you didn't vote for him?"
"Well, because it's true. I am a good Republican; you know that."

She was a storekeeper's daughter from a small town in Ohio; she had probably grown up hearing the phrase "good Republican" as an index of respectability and clean clothes. And maybe she had come to relax her standards of respectability, maybe she didn't even care much about clean clothes anymore, but "good Republican" was worth clinging to. It would be helpful when she met the customers for her garden figures, the people whose low, courteous voices would welcome her into their lives and who would almost certainly turn out to be Republicans too.

"I believe in the aristocracy!" she often cried, trying to make herself heard above the rumble of voices when her guests were discussing Communism, and they seldom paid her any attention. They liked her well enough; she gave parties with plenty of liquor, and she was an agreeable hostess if only because of her touching eagerness to please; but in any talk of politics she was like a shrill, exasperating child. She believed in the aristocracy.

She believed in God too, or at least in the ceremony of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, which she attended once or twice a year. And she believed in Eric Nicholson, the handsome middle-aged Englishman who was her lover. He had something to do with the American end of a British chain of foundries: his company cast ornamental objects into bronze and lead. The cupolas of college and high-school buildings all over the East, the lead casement windows for Tudor-style homes in places like Scarsdale and Bronxville—these were some of the things Eric Nicholson's firm had accomplished. He was always self-deprecating about his business, but ruddy and glowing with its success.

My mother had met him the year before, when she'd sought help in having one of her garden figures cast into bronze, to be "placed on consignment" with some garden-sculpture gallery from which it would never be sold. Eric Nicholson had persuaded her that lead would be almost as nice as bronze and much cheaper; then he'd asked her out to dinner, and that evening changed our lives.

Mr. Nicholson rarely spoke to my sister or me, and I think we were both frightened of him, but he overwhelmed us with gifts. At first they were mostly books—a volume of cartoons from Punch, a partial set of Dickens, a book called England in Tudor Times containing tissue-covered color plates that Edith liked. But in the summer of 1933, when our father arranged for us to spend two weeks with our mother at a small lake in New Jersey, Mr. Nicholson's gifts became a cornucopia of sporting goods. He gave Edith a steel fishing rod with a reel so intricate that none of us could have figured it out even if we'd known how to fish, a wicker creel for carrying the fish she would never catch, and a sheathed hunting knife to be worn at her waist. He gave me a short ax whose head was encased in a leather holster and strapped to my belt—I guess this was for cutting firewood to cook the fish—and a cumbersome net with a handle that hung from an elastic shoulder strap, in case I should be called upon to wade in and help Edith land a tricky one. There was nothing to do in that New Jersey village except take walks, or what my mother called good hikes; and every day, as we plodded out through the insect-humming weeds in the sun, we wore our full regalia of useless equipment.

That same summer Mr. Nicholson gave me a three-year subscription to Field & Stream, and I think that impenetrable magazine was the least appropriate of all his gifts because it kept coming in the mail for such a long, long time after everything else had changed for us: after we'd moved out of New York to Scarsdale, where Mr. Nicholson had found a house with a low rent, and after he had abandoned my mother in that house—with no warning—to return to England and to the wife from whom he'd never really been divorced.

But all that came later; I want to go back to the time between Franklin D. Roosevelt's election and his Inauguration, when his head was slowly taking shape on my mother's modeling stand.

Her original plan had been to make it life-size, or larger than life-size, but Mr. Nicholson urged her to scale it down for economy in the casting, and so she made it only six or seven inches high. He persuaded her too, for the second time since he'd known her, that lead would be almost as nice as bronze.

She had always said she didn't mind at all if Edith and I watched her work, but we had never much wanted to; now it was a little more interesting because we could watch her sift through many photographs of Roosevelt cut from newspapers until she found one that would help her execute a subtle plane of cheek or brow.

But most of our day was taken up with school. John Cabot might go to school in Hastings-on-Hudson, for which Edith would always yearn, but we had what even Edith admitted was the best thing: we went to school in our bedroom.
During the previous year my mother had enrolled us in the public school down the street, but she'd begun to regret it when we came home with lice in our hair. Then one day Edith came home accused of having stolen a boy's coat, and that was too much. She withdrew us both, in defiance of the city truant officer, and pleaded with my father to help her meet the cost of a private school. He refused. The rent she paid and the bills she ran up were already taxing him far beyond the terms of the divorce agreement; he was in debt; surely she must realize he was lucky even to have a job. Would she ever learn to be reasonable?

It was Howard Whitman who broke the deadlock. He knew of an inexpensive, fully accredited mail-order service called The Calvert School, intended mainly for the homes of children who were invalids. The Calvert School furnished weekly supplies of books and materials and study plans; all she would need was someone in the house to administer the program and to serve as a tutor. And someone like Bart Kampen would be ideal for the job.

"The skinny fellow?" she asked. "The Jewish boy from Holland or wherever it is?"

"He's very well educated, Helen," Howard told her. "And he speaks fluent English, and he'd be very conscientious. And he could certainly use the money."

We were delighted to learn that Bart Kampen would be our tutor. With the exception of Howard himself, Bart was probably our favorite among the adults around the courtyard. He was twenty-eight or so, young enough so that his ears could still turn red when he was teased by children; we had found that out in teasing him once or twice about such matters as that his socks didn't match. He was tall and very thin and seemed always to look startled except when he was comforted enough to smile. He was a violinist, a Dutch Jew who had emigrated the year before in the hope of joining a symphony orchestra, and eventually of launching a concert career. But the symphonies weren't hiring then, nor were lesser orchestras, so Bart had gone without work for a long time. He lived alone in a room on Seventh Avenue, not far from the courtyard, and people who liked him used to worry that he might not have enough to eat. He owned two suits, both cut in a way that must have been stylish in the Netherlands at the time: stiff, heavily padded shoulders and a nipped-in waist; they would probably have looked better on someone with a little more meat on his bones. In shirtsleeves, with the cuffs rolled back, his hairy wrists and forearms looked even more fragile than you might have expected, but his long hands were shapely and strong enough to suggest authority on the violin.

"I'll leave it entirely up to you, Bart," my mother said when he asked if she had any instructions for our tutoring. "I know you'll do wonders with them."

A small table was moved into our bedroom, under the window, and three chairs placed around it. Bart sat in the middle so that he could divide his time equally between Edith and me. Big, clean, heavy brown envelopes arrived in the mail from The Calvert School once a week, and when Bart slid their fascinating contents onto the table it was like settling down to begin a game.

Edith was in the fifth grade that year—her part of the table was given over to incomprehensible talk about English and History and Social Studies—and I was in the first. I spent my mornings asking Bart to help me puzzle out the very opening moves of an education.

"Take your time, Billy," he would say. "Don't get impatient with this. Once you have it you'll see how easy it is, and then you'll be ready for the next thing."

At eleven each morning we would take a break. We'd go downstairs and out to the part of the courtyard that had a little grass. Bart would carefully lay his folded coat on the sidelines, turn back his shirt cuffs, and present himself as ready to give what he called airplane rides. Taking us one at a time, he would grasp one wrist and one ankle; then he'd whirl us off our feet and around and around, with himself as the pivot, until the courtyard and the buildings and the city and the world were lost in the dizzying blur of our flight.

After the airplane rides we would hurry down the steps into the studio, where we'd usually find that my mother had set out a tray bearing three tall glasses of cold Ovaltine, sometimes with cookies on the side and sometimes not. I once overheard her telling Sloane Cabot she thought the Ovaltine must be Bart's first nourishment of the day—and I think she was probably right, if only because of the way his hand would tremble in reaching for his glass. Sometimes she'd forget to prepare the tray and we'd crowd into the kitchen and fix it
ourselves; I can never see a jar of Ovaltine on a grocery shelf without remembering those times. Then it was back upstairs to school again. And during that year, by coaxing and prodding and telling me not to get impatient, Bart Kampen taught me to read.

It was an excellent opportunity for showing off. I would pull books down from my mother’s shelves—mostly books that were the gifts of Mr. Nicholson—and try to impress her by reading mangled sentences aloud.

“That’s wonderful, dear,” she would say. “You’ve really learned to read, haven’t you.”

Soon a white-and-yellow “More light” stamp was affixed to every page of my Calvert First Grade Reader, proving I had mastered it, and others were accumulating at a slower rate in my arithmetic work-book. Still other stamps were fastened to the wall beside my place at the school table, arranged in a proud little white-and-yellow thumb-smudged column that rose as high as I could reach.

“You shouldn’t have put your stamps on the wall,” Edith said.

“Why?”

“Well, because they’ll be hard to take off.”

“Who’s going to take them off?”

That small room of ours, with its double function of sleep and learning, stands more clearly in my memory than any other part of our home. Someone should probably have told my mother that a girl and boy of our ages ought to have separate rooms, but that never occurred to me until much later. Our cots were set foot-to-foot against the wall, leaving just enough space to pass alongside them to the school table, and we had some good conversations as we lay waiting for sleep at night. The one I remember best was the time Edith told me about the sound of the city.

“I don’t mean just the loud noises,” she said, “like the siren going by just now, or those car doors slamming, or all the laughing and shouting down the street; that’s just close-up stuff. I’m talking about something else. Because you see there are millions and millions of people in New York—more people than you can possibly imagine, ever—and most of them are doing something that makes sound. Maybe talking, or playing the radio, maybe closing doors, maybe putting their forks down on their plates if they’re having dinner, or dropping their shoes if they’re going to bed—and because there are so many of them, all those little sounds add up and come together in a

kind of hum. But it’s so faint—so very, very faint—that you can’t hear it unless you listen very carefully for a long time.”

“Can you hear it?” I asked her.

“Sometimes. I listen every night, but I can only hear it sometimes. Other times I fall asleep. Let’s be quiet now, and just listen. See if you can hear it, Billy.”

And I tried hard, closing my eyes as if that would help, opening my mouth to minimize the sound of my breathing, but in the end I had to tell her I’d failed. “How about you?” I asked.

“Oh, I heard it,” she said. “Just for a few seconds, but I heard it. You’ll hear it too, if you keep trying. It’s worth waiting for. When you hear it, you’re hearing the whole city of New York.”

The high point of our week was Friday afternoon, when John Cabot came home from Hastings. He exuded health and normality; he brought fresh suburban air into our bohemian lives. He even transformed his mother’s small apartment, while he was there, into an enviable place of rest between vigorous encounters with the world. He subscribed to both Boys’ Life and Open Road for Boys, and these seemed to me to be wonderful things to have in your house, if only for the illustrations. John dressed in the same heroic way as the boys shown in those magazines, corduroy knickers with ribbed stockings pulled taut over his muscular calves. He talked a lot about the Hastings high-school football team, for which he planned to try out as soon as he was old enough, and about Hastings friends whose names and personalities grew almost as familiar to us as if they were friends of our own. He taught us invigorating new ways to speak, like saying “What’s the diff?” instead of “What’s the difference?” And he was better even than Edith at finding new things to do in the courtyard.

You could buy goldfish for ten or fifteen cents apiece in Woolworth’s then, and one day we brought home three of them to keep in the fountain. We sprinkled the water with more Woolworth’s granulated fish food than they could possibly need, and we named them after ourselves: “John,” “Edith,” and “Billy.” For a week or two Edith and I would run to the fountain every morning, before Bart came for school, to make sure they were still alive and to see if they had enough food, and to watch them.

“Have you noticed how much bigger Billy’s getting?” Edith asked me. “He’s huge. He’s almost as big as John and Edith now. He’ll probably be bigger than both of them.”
Then one weekend when John was home he called our attention to how quickly the fish could turn and move. "They have better reflexes than humans," he explained. "When they see a shadow in the water, or anything that looks like danger, they get away faster than you can blink. Watch." And he sank one hand into the water to make a grab for the fish named Edith, but she evaded him and fled. "See that?" he asked. "How's that for speed? Know something? I bet you could shoot an arrow in there, and they'd get away in time. Wait." To prove his point he ran to his mother's apartment and came back with the handsome bow and arrow he had made at summer camp (going to camp every summer was another admirable thing about John); then he knelt at the rim of the fountain like the picture of an archer, his bow steady in one strong hand and the feathered end of his arrow tight against the bowstring in the other. He was taking aim at the fish named Billy. "Now, the velocity of this arrow," he said in a voice weakened by his effort, "is probably more than a car going eighty miles an hour. It's probably more like an airplane, or maybe even more than that. Okay; watch."

The fish named Billy was suddenly floating dead on the surface, on his side, impaled a quarter of the way up the arrow with parts of his pink guts dribbled along the shaft.

I was too old to cry, but something had to be done about the shock and rage and grief that filled me as I ran from the fountain, heading blindly for home, and halfway there I came upon my mother. She stood looking very clean, wearing a new coat and dress I'd never seen before and fastened to the arm of Mr. Nicholson. They were either just going out or just coming in—I didn't care which—and Mr. Nicholson frowned at me (he had told me more than once that boys of my age went to boarding school in England), but I didn't care about that either. I bent my head into her waist and didn't stop crying until long after I'd felt her hands stroking my back, until after she had assured me that goldfish didn't cost much and I'd have another one soon, and that John was sorry for the thoughtless thing he'd done. I had discovered, or rediscovered, that crying is a pleasure—that it can be a pleasure beyond all reckoning if your head is pressed in your mother's waist and her hands are on your back, and if she happens to be wearing clean clothes.

There were other pleasures. We had a good Christmas Eve in our house that year, or at least it was good at first. My father was there, which obliged Mr. Nicholson to stay away, and it was nice to see how relaxed he was among my mother's friends. He was shy, but they seemed to like him. He got along especially well with Bart Kampen.

Howard Whitman's daughter, Molly, a sweet-natured girl of about my age, had come in from Tarrytown to spend the holidays with him, and there were several other children whom we knew but rarely saw. John looked very mature that night in a dark coat and tie, plainly aware of his social responsibilities as the oldest boy.

After awhile, with no plan, the party drifted back into the dining-room area and staged an impromptu vaudeville. Howard started it: he brought the tall stool from my mother's modeling stand and sat his daughter on it, facing the audience. He folded back the opening of a brown paper bag two or three times and fitted it on to her head; then he took off his suit coat and draped it around her backwards, up to the chin; he went behind her, crouched out of sight, and worked his hands through the coat sleeves so that when they emerged they appeared to be hers. And the sight of a smiling little girl in a paper-bag hat, waving and gesturing with huge, expressive hands, was enough to make everyone laugh. The big hands wiped her eyes and stroked her chin and pushed her hair behind her ears; then they elaborately thumbed her nose at us.

Next came Sloane Cabot. She sat very straight on the stool with her heels hooked over the rungs in such a way as to show her good legs to their best advantage, but her first act didn't go over.

"Well," she began, "I was at work today—you know my office is on the fortieth floor—when I happened to glance up from my typewriter and saw this big old man sort of crouched on the ledge outside the window, with a white beard and a funny red suit. So I ran to the window and opened it and said, 'Are you all right?' Well, it was Santa Claus, and he said, 'Of course I'm all right; I'm used to high places. But listen, miss: can you direct me to number seventy-five Bedford Street?'

There was more, but our embarrassed looks must have told her we knew we were being condescended to; as soon as she'd found a way to finish it she did so quickly. Then, after a thoughtful pause, she tried something else that turned out to be much better.

"Have you children ever heard the story of the first Christmas?"
she asked. "When Jesus was born?" And she began to tell it in the kind
of hushed, dramatic voice she must have hoped might be used by the
narrators of her more serious radio plays.

"... And there were still many miles to go before they reached
Bethlehem," she said, "and it was a cold night. Now, Mary knew she
would very soon have a baby. She even knew, because an angel had
told her, that her baby might one day be the savior of all mankind. But
she was only a young girl"—here Sloane's eyes glistened, as if they
might be filling with tears—"and the traveling had exhausted her. She
was bruised by the jolting gait of the donkey and she ached all over,
and she thought they'd never, ever get there, and all she could say was
'Oh, Joseph, I'm so tired.'"

The story went on through the rejection at the inn, and the birth in
the stable, and the manger, and the animals, and the arrival of the
three kings; when it was over we clapped a long time because Sloane
had told it so well.

"Daddy?" Edith asked. "Will you sing for us?"

"Oh well, thanks, honey," he said, "but no; I really need a piano for
that. Thanks anyway."

The final performer of the evening was Bart Kampen, persuaded
by popular demand to go home and get his violin. There was no sur-
pise in discovering that he played like a professional, like something
you might easily hear on the radio; the enjoyment came from watch-
ing how his thin face frowned over the chin rest, empty of all emotion
except concern that the sound be right. We were proud of him.

Some time after my father left a good many other adults began to
arrive, most of them strangers to me, looking as though they'd already
been to several other parties that night. It was very late, or rather very
early Christmas morning, when I looked into the kitchen and saw
Sloane standing close to a bald man I didn't know. He held a trem-
bling drink in one hand and slowly massaged her shoulder with the
other; she seemed to be shrinking back against the old wooden ice-
box. Sloane had a way of smiling that allowed little wisps of cigarette
smoke to escape from between her almost-closed lips while she
looked you up and down, and she was doing that. Then the man put
his drink on top of the icebox and took her in his arms, and I couldn't
see her face anymore.

Another man, in a rumpled brown suit, lay unconscious on the
dining-room floor. I walked around him and went into the studio,
where a good-looking young woman stood weeping wretchedly and
three men kept getting in each other's way as they tried to comfort
her. Then I saw that one of the men was Bart, and I watched while he
outlasted the other two and turned the girl away toward the door. He
put his arm around her and she nestled her head in his shoulder; that
was how they left the house.

Edith looked jaded in her wrinkled party dress. She was reclining
in our old Hastings-on-Hudson easy chair with her head tipped back
and her legs flung out over both the chair's arms, and John sat cross-
legged on the floor near one of her dangling feet. They seemed to
have been talking about something that didn't interest either of them
much, and the talk petered out altogether when I sat on the floor to
join them.

"Billy," she said, "do you realize what time it is?"

"What's the diff?" I said.

"You should've been in bed hours ago. Come on. Let's go up."

"I don't feel like it."

"Well," she said, "I'm going up, anyway." and she got laboriously
out of the chair and walked away into the crowd.

John turned to me and narrowed his eyes un pleasingly. "Know
something?" he said. "When she was in the chair that way I could see
everything."

"Huh?"

"I could see everything. I could see the crack, and the hair. She's
beginning to get hair."

I had observed these features of my sister many times—in the
bathtub, or when she was changing her clothes—and hadn't found
them especially remarkable; even so, I understood at once how
remarkable they must have been for him. If only he had smiled in a
bashful way we might have laughed together like a couple of regular
fellows out of Open Road for Boys, but his face was still set in that
disinfluent look.

"I kept looking and looking," he said, "and I had to keep her talking
so she wouldn't catch on, but I was doing fine until you had to come
over and ruin it."

Was I supposed to apologize? That didn't seem right, but nothing
else seemed right either. All I did was look at the floor.

When I finally got to bed there was scarcely time for trying to hear
the elusive sound of the city—I had found that a good way to keep
from thinking of anything else—when my mother came blundering in. She'd had too much to drink and wanted to lie down, but instead of going to her own room she got into bed with me. "Oh," she said. "Oh, my boy. Oh, my boy." It was a narrow cot and there was no way to make room for her; then suddenly she retched, bolted to her feet, and ran for the bathroom, where I heard her vomiting. And when I moved over into the part of the bed she had occupied my face recoiled quickly, but not quite in time, from the sick mouthful of puke she had left on her side of the pillow.

For a month—or so that winter we didn't see much of Sloane because she said she was "working on something big. Something really big." When it was finished she brought it to the studio, looking tired but prettier than ever, and shyly asked if she could read it aloud.

"Wonderful," my mother said. "What's it about?"

"That's the best part. It's about us. All of us. Listen."

Bart had gone for the day and Edith was out in the courtyard by herself—she often played by herself—so there was nobody for an audience but my mother and me. We sat on the sofa and Sloane arranged herself on the tall stool, just as she'd done for telling the Bethlehem story.

"There is an enchanted courtyard in Greenwich Village," she said. "It's only a narrow patch of brick and green among the irregular shapes of very old houses, but what makes it enchanted is that the people who live in it, or near it, have come to form an enchanted circle of friends."

"None of them have enough money and some are quite poor, but they believe in the future; they believe in each other, and in themselves."

"There is Howard, once a top reporter on a metropolitan daily newspaper. Everyone knows Howard will soon scale the journalistic heights again, and in the meantime he serves as the wise and humorous sage of the courtyard."

"There is Bart, a young violinist clearly destined for virtuosity on the concert stage, who just for the present must graciously accept all lunch and dinner invitations in order to survive."

"And there is Helen, a sculptor whose charming works will someday grace the finest gardens in America, and whose studio is the favorite gathering place for members of the circle."

There was more like that, introducing other characters, and toward

the end she got around to the children. She described my sister as "a lanky, dreamy tomboy," which was odd—I had never thought of Edith that way—and she called me "a sad-eyed, seven-year-old philosopher," which was wholly baffling. When the introduction was over she paused a few seconds for dramatic effect and then went into the opening episode of the series, or what I suppose would be called the "pilot."

I couldn't follow the story very well—it seemed to be mostly an excuse for bringing each character up to the microphone for a few lines apiece—and before long I was listening only to see if there would be any lines for the character based on me. And there were, in a way. She announced my name—"Billy"—but then instead of speaking she put her mouth through a terrible series of contortions, accompanied by funny little bursts of sound, and by the time the words came out I didn't care what they were. It was true that I stuttered badly—I wouldn't get over it for five or six more years—but I hadn't expected anyone to put it on the radio.

"Oh, Sloane, that's marvelous," my mother said when the reading was over. "That's really exciting."

And Sloane was carefully stacking her typed pages in the way she'd probably been taught to do in secretarial school, blushing and smiling with pride. "Well," she said, "it probably needs work, but I do think it's got a lot of potential."

"It's perfect," my mother said. "Just the way it is."

Sloane mailed the script to a radio producer and he mailed it back with a letter typed by some radio secretary, explaining that her material had too limited an appeal to be commercial. The radio public was not yet ready, he said, for a story of Greenwich Village life.

Then it was March. The new President promised that the only thing we had to fear was fear itself, and soon after that his head came packed in wood and excelsior from Mr. Nicholson's foundry.

It was a fairly good likeness. She had caught the famous lift of the chin—it might not have looked like him at all if she hadn't—and everyone told her it was fine. What nobody said was that her original plan had been right, and Mr. Nicholson shouldn't have interfered: it was too small. It didn't look heroic. If you could have hollowed it out and put a slot in the top, it might have made a serviceable bank for loose change.

The foundry had burnished the lead until it shone almost silver in
the highlights, and they’d mounted it on a sturdy little base of heavy black plastic. They had sent back three copies: one for the White House presentation, one to keep for exhibition purposes, and an extra one. But the extra one soon toppled to the floor and was badly damaged—the nose mashed almost into the chin—and my mother might have burst into tears if Howard Whitman hadn’t made everyone laugh by saying it was now a good portrait of Vice President Garner.

Charlie Hines, Howard’s old friend from the Post who was now a minor member of the White House staff, made an appointment for my mother with the President late on a weekday morning. She arranged for Sloane to spend the night with Edith and me; then she took an evening train down to Washington, carrying the sculpture in a cardboard box, and stayed at one of the less expensive Washington hotels. In the morning she met Charlie Hines in some crowded White House anteroom, where I guess they disposed of the cardboard box, and he took her to the waiting room outside the Oval Office. He sat with her as she held the naked head in her lap, and when their turn came he escorted her in to the President’s desk for the presentation. It didn’t take long. There were no reporters and no photographers.

Afterwards Charlie Hines took her out to lunch, probably because he’d promised Howard Whitman to do so. I imagine it wasn’t a first-class restaurant, more likely some bustling, no-nonsense place favored by the working press, and I imagine they had trouble making conversation until they settled on Howard, and on what a shame it was that he was still out of work.

“No, but do you know Howard’s friend Bart Kampen?” Charlie asked. “The young Dutchman? The violinist?”

“Yes, certainly,” she said. “I know Bart.”

“Well, Jesus, there’s one story with a happy ending, right? Have you heard about that? Last time I saw Bart he said, ‘Charlie, the Depression’s over for me,’ and he told me he’d found some rich, dumb, crazy woman who’s paying him to tutor her kids.”

I can picture how she looked riding the long, slow train back to New York that afternoon. She must have sat staring straight ahead or out the dirty window, seeing nothing, her eyes round and her face held in a soft shape of hurt. Her adventure with Franklin D. Roosevelt had come to nothing. There would be no photographs or interviews or feature articles, no thrilling moments of newsreel coverage; strangers would never know of how she’d come from a small Ohio town, or of how she’d nurtured her talent through the brave, difficult, one-woman journey that had brought her to the attention of the world. It wasn’t fair.

All she had to look forward to now was her romance with Eric Nicholson, and I think she may have known even then that it was faltering—his final desertion came the next fall.

She was forty-one, an age when even romantics must admit that youth is gone, and she had nothing to show for the years but a studio crowded with green plaster statues that nobody would buy. She believed in the aristocracy, but there was no reason to suppose the aristocracy would ever believe in her.

And every time she thought of what Charlie Hines had said about Bart Kampen—oh, how hateful; oh, how hateful—the humiliation came back in wave on wave, in merciless rhythm to the clatter of the train.

She made a brave show of her homecoming, though nobody was there to greet her but Sloane and Edith and me. Sloane had fed us, and she said, “There’s a plate for you in the oven, Helen,” but my mother said she’d rather just have a drink instead. She was then at the onset of a long battle with alcohol that she would ultimately lose; it must have seemed bracing that night to decide on a drink instead of dinner. Then she told us “all about” her trip to Washington, managing to make it sound like a success. She talked of how thrilling it was to be actually inside the White House; she repeated whatever small, courteous thing it was that President Roosevelt had said to her on receiving the head. And she had brought back souvenirs: a handful of note-size White House stationery for Edith, and a well-used briar pipe for me. She explained that she’d seen a very distinguished-looking man smoking the pipe in the waiting room outside the Oval Office; when his name was called he had knocked it out quickly into an ashtray and left it there as he hurried inside. She had waited until she was sure no one was looking; then she’d taken the pipe from the ashtray and put it in her purse. “Because I knew he must have been somebody important,” she said. “He could easily have been a member of the Cabinet, or something like that. Anyway, I thought you’d have a lot of fun with it.” But I didn’t. It was too heavy to hold in my teeth and it tasted terrible when I sucked on it; besides, I kept wondering what the man must have thought when he came out of the President’s office and found it gone.
Sloane went home after awhile, and my mother sat drinking alone at the dinette table. I think she hoped Howard Whitman or some of her other friends might drop in, but nobody did. It was almost our bedtime when she looked up and said, "Edith? Run out in the garden and see if you can find Bart."

He had recently bought a pair of bright tan shoes with crepe soles. I saw those shoes trip rapidly down the dark brick steps beyond the windows—he seemed scarcely to touch each step in his buoyancy—and then I saw him come smiling into the studio, with Edith closing the door behind him. "Helen!" he said. "You're back!"

She acknowledged that she was back. Then she got up from the table and slowly advanced on him, and Edith and I began to realize we were in for something bad.

"Bart," she said, "I had lunch with Charlie Hines in Washington today."

"Oh?"

"And we had a very interesting talk. He seems to know you very well."

"Oh, not really; we've met a few times at Howard's, but we're not really—"

"And he said you'd told him the Depression was over for you because you'd found some rich, dumb, crazy woman who was paying you to tutor her kids. Don't interrupt me."

But Bart clearly had no intention of interrupting her. He was backing away from her in his soundless shoes, retreating past one stiff green garden child after another. His face looked startled and pink.

"I'm not a rich woman, Bart," she said, bearing down on him, "And I'm not dumb. And I'm not crazy. And I can recognize ingratitude and disloyalty and sheer, rotten viciousness and lies when they're thrown in my face."

My sister and I were halfway up the stairs, jostling each other in our need to hide before the worst part came. The worst part of these things always came at the end, after she'd lost all control and gone on shouting anyway.

"I want you to get out of my house, Bart," she said. "And I don't ever want to see you again. And I want to tell you something. All my life I've hated people who say 'Some of my best friends are Jews.' Because none of my friends are Jews, or ever will be. Do you understand me? None of my friends are Jews, or ever will be."

The studio was quiet after that. Without speaking, avoiding each other's eyes, Edith and I got into our pajamas and into bed. But it wasn't more than a few minutes before the house began to ring with our mother's raging voice all over again, as if Bart had somehow been brought back and made to take his punishment twice.

"...And I said 'None of my friends are Jews, or ever will be.'"

She was on the telephone, giving Sloane Cabot the highlights of the scene, and it was clear that Sloane would take her side and comfort her. Sloane might know how the Virgin Mary felt on the way to Bethlehem, but she also knew how to play my stutter for laughs. In a case like this she would quickly see where her allegiance lay, and it wouldn't cost her much to drop Bart Kampen from her enchanted circle.

When the telephone call came to an end at last there was silence downstairs until we heard her working with the ice pick in the icebox: she was making herself another drink.

There would be no more school in our room. We would probably never see Bart again—or if we ever did, he would probably not want to see us. But our mother was ours; we were hers; and we lived with that knowledge as we lay listening for the faint, faint sound of millions.
SAMO© LIVES

Darren rode into the city that morning wearing the same suit from the day before. He scratched at a crusted stain on his lapel, wondering whether it was blood or something he had eaten. He drifted off to sleep and was awoken by the conductor. He pulled out his monthly pass and the conductor walked on. That’s when Darren noticed the words written on the back of the headrest in front of him: “Do not mourn the dead, for they are already gone and await the living.” There was no way this enlightened scribbling inside a Metro-North passenger car could be original. Was it a bereavement poem? He pulled out his smartphone and did a quick search. Nothing.

His commute to the city was so routine, he could usually guess which cars would have regular commuters, which order they would all exit, and the conductors that were likely to be working. He rode in with Manhattan money-makers, a sea of mostly bald, and almost exclusively white men, all opening and closing their newspapers or playing with their tablet computers. You could tell a little bit about each guy by what he read. Financial Times of London? Well, that’s a guy who’s probably at a fund that invests heavily overseas and he may have a predilection for escorts. Wall Street Journal? A stripper-
fucker. The New York Times? He’s the guy with a manicured catamite in Chelsea.

Darren made his way through Grand Central and ran downstairs to catch the 4. He looked at the other human cattle—all rubbing each other raw—a ball-peen hammer would have been welcome. He never did understand why so many people loved living in New York City. Darren had spent two years living there and had seen his fair share of crazy shit, but that’s not the reason he left. It was the smells; there was always something feculent in the air. The noxious fumes coming through sidewalk grates, the faint aroma of piss that hovered over everything, and the smell of trash in the summer—it all made him want to throw up.

So, he did what most New Yorkers do when fed up with city life. He fled to the suburbs. To be more specific, he moved to an over-priced one-bedroom condo in Fairfield. He relished the quiet in Connecticut and the fact that it had trees. New York City lacks both.

Darren still thought about the modern-day Epicurus when he got off at Fulton Street. He stopped at a coffee shop and hoped caffeine would be enough to get him through the day. Why didn’t the scribbler at least write his name? Darren imagined the author would want recognition. People write so that others will remember them; it’s their shot at immortality.

“Anything else?” the barista said.

“What?”

“Anything else?”

“A sandwich or something?”

“No.”

It was Friday and Darren found it hard to remember when he last slept. He was pretty sure it had been on Wednesday, but it could have easily been Tuesday.

The last time he hadn’t slept in three days, he kept having this persistent feeling that people
could read his mind. He talked to his therapist about that and the thing that was troubling him even more.

“Hey, I’ve been experiencing…uh, like…this is gonna sound crazy, but this sensation…it’s like there are invisible bugs crawling on my skin,” he said. She looked at him for a few moments and then put her pen down.

“How long has that been going on?”

“It’s a fairly recent development.”

“Formication, it’s called formication.”

“What? You mean like fucking?” He said and thought he must be hearing shit as well. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“No, formication. With an m, it’s fairly common for people who use a lot of cocaine or methamphetamines. You’re experiencing tactile hallucinations.”

He sat back in the chair and said, “Oh.”

*****

Darren hated sales meetings almost as much as his job. The bank would bring in the same kind of people to deliver pep talks to financial advisors. This meeting was no different. An ersatz human in his forties with a $200 haircut, custom suit, Acutane-perfect skin, and effulgent veneers was giving the rah-rah. Darren observed all the other people in the room and their rapt attention to the speaker.

Darren noticed the guy seated next to him was staring in his direction.

“Hey,” he said, motioning back and forth under his nose with his curled index. “You’re bleeding.”

After the meeting was over, Darren made his way to mid-town. He had plans to meet with Meredith late in the afternoon. She wanted to go to MOMA. She had friends that were artists and she
often dragged him along to new exhibits. Darren didn’t understand the art crowd, but he tolerated them for Meredith’s sake.

Darren had met Meredith the year before. He was in the Upper East Side apartment of someone he didn’t know. That’s when he saw her; she was in a diaphanous shirt with no bra. She slowly ground her teeth from side to side and nodded her head, while a guy with a glass in hand spoke as much with his free hand as his lips. Darren looked at the muscles of Meredith’s jaw and how they tensed. He overheard her say, “It’s hot in here.” The gesticulator excused himself and went to the bathroom. Darren saw his opportunity and took it. He walked up to Meredith and from up close he could see her dilated pupils and the dewy sweat on her forehead.

“You look bored,” he said.

****

“I really like this one,” Meredith said, “the message is a bit overt, but I like it.”

Darren looked at the sculpture of a face with a Coca-Cola bottle shoved down its gullet and then said, “Is it supposed to be some kind of phallic thing?”

She turned to him and the skin between her eyebrows crinkled. Darren observed this change in her facial features and knew from previous experience what would follow.

“You think it’s a dick joke?”

“Come on Meredith, I mean look at it.”

“It’s about corporate greed and how people are forced into this…this system of passive consumption.”

And then for emphasis, she waved her hands above her head.

“Oh, is that what it’s about Mrs. Marx?”

“Why do you have to do this?”
“Do what?”

“Be such an asshole.”

Next they sat in a room where a projector played a continual loop of a time-lapsed recording of a dead beagle decomposing. Darren could not stop looking at the dog’s eyes. He imagined that the dog had been someone’s pet; that it had once run around some yard. He turned to Meredith and recounted what he had seen written on the Metro-North seat.

“What do you make of that?”

“I don’t know. Sounds sad. Actually, it reminds me of Jean-Michel Basquiat,” she said without taking her eyes off the screen.

“Who?”

“He was an artist. Before he became a huge star, he used to go around downtown and tag buildings with his observations about life. And then he’d sign ‘Samo Lives’ underneath. I’m surprised you never heard of him.”

“Why?”

“Because he was black.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? That means I should be an expert?”

“No, nevermind. I don’t want to fight you Darren. Let’s leave; I can tell you don’t want to be here.”

*****

The bar was only a few blocks from where she lived. He was on his fourth shot. Meredith absent-mindedly stirred her cosmopolitan. She reached across the table and touched his hand.

“Why don’t you talk to me?”

“Do you have any coke back at your place?”
“Darren, I’m serious. You didn’t talk at all at her funeral.”

“What’s to say? She’s gone.”

He raised his hand and nodded at the bartender.

“Two more shots and a beer.”

He got up. Then he walked past a group of people that had just come in. He went into the bathroom and took a look at himself in the mirror. He thought about his mother when she was in the hospital dying of cancer. He closed his eyes. He took out a small baggie of cocaine. He held up the bag and the mother-of-pearl color of its contents shined under the bathroom light. He used one of his keys to scoop out what was left. He sniffed. He loosened his tie; then he took it off altogether. He unbuttoned his shirt at the collar.

When he returned to the bar, he rubbed Meredith’s back.

“I just thought about something while I was in the bathroom.”

“What?”

“I think back in World War II there was a guy that wrote ‘Kilroy was here.’ He was probably some G.I. who had seen all sorts of horrors and didn’t want his time here, his existence, to go unrecorded.”

She gave him a wan smile.

“Can we go to my place?” she said.

*****

When they congressed, something had changed. Darren felt it and he thought he could see it in her eyes too. Meredith got out of the bed and picked up the mirror. She took a straw and sniffed two lines; then she passed it to Darren. He sniffed.

“My heart’s fucking racing,” he said.
“Mine too.”

She lay next to him, placing her hand over his chest.

“Are you staying tonight?”

“No, I’m going to take the last train back to Connecticut.”

“Do you love me?”

He turned to look at her. Her eyes were red around the lids and her nostrils too. He said nothing.

She turned her back to him and quietly sobbed.

*****

This time the train was filled with late night party-goers, having had their fun, they were on their way back to the suburbs. They were all speaking loudly and a few were slurring their words. A family walked through the car on their way to the next, in search of empty passenger seats. Darren watched the mother and father; they both looked to be in their fifties. The son was college-aged. Darren thought about his own mother and the look in her eyes when she died. When the light went out of them, Darren knew that there would be nothing after this world.
“Absolutely nothing,” the Colonel replied when I stepped into the kitchen and asked what I could do to help. The asparagus, drizzled with olive oil, and a lemon and soy marinated chicken breast were already on the grill, and he was rubbing kosher salt into three thick rib eyes. When he retired from the army five years ago, he told me to call him by his first name, but after that year in Iraq, I could never think of him as anything but The Colonel or Sir.

When I had phoned him this morning, I was in a mental quagmire. Without hesitation, he invited my wife, Beth, and I to dinner and an overnight stay at his house. Although I was a New Yorker, born and bred, I loved the beauty and solitude of the Colonel’s country estate in Connecticut.

The Colonel flipped the steaks on the stoneware platter and salted the other side, as I peeked into the heavy pot simmering on the stove. Steam and the aroma of butter and garlic escaped when I lifted the lid. “Cathy’s wild rice recipe,” he said without looking up. “How are you and Beth doing?”

When I phoned, I hadn’t told him what the problem was, only that I needed to talk. He was digging. “We’re great. Ashlee starts college this September and we’re actually looking forward to a house with no kids.”

He stared at me, waiting for me to say more. When I didn’t, he picked up the platter and announced, “To the grill.”

He led the way onto the screened porch where Beth and his wife were sitting around a glass-topped table sipping ice tea. Although two years younger than her fifty-year-old husband, Cathy could pass for thirty-something. She flipped her blond hair back and rose. My eyes were drawn to her long tanned legs. I quickly looked away, reminding myself that not only was she
the Colonel’s wife, but my wife sat five feet away. She inspected the steaks as the Colonel stood
there patiently. She nodded then asked, “How long before we’re ready to eat?”

“Nine minutes,” he replied without a trace of expression.

“Not eight or ten?” Her smile showed perfect teeth.

“Four minutes per side, a half minute to turn them and a half minute to place them on the
platter for delivery to the table.”

“You are so cute,” she said, kissing his cheek and patting his butt. “Beth and I will set the
table.”

I followed the Colonel to the stone patio, where he lifted the lid of the stainless steel grill
and twisted the two right knobs to the sear mark. The steaks sizzled when they hit the hot grid.
He turned the two left burners to medium-low, flipped the chicken breast—Cathy didn’t eat red
meat—rolled the asparagus stalks, and closed the lid.

“I’m facing an ethical dilemma,” I said, staring across the lush green lawn to the wood
line a hundred yards away. Two deer looked up, then went back to eating the grass at the forest
edge.

“Is the dilemma over what is the right thing to do, or is it about the cost of doing what is
right?”

I had never worked for a man who was able to cut to the heart of an issue as quickly and
directly. When I was one of his JAG lawyers in Baghdad, I first found that maddening and
frustrating. During my years as a prosecutor in the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office, the
police reported to me—at least during the case preparation and trial phase of an investigation.
Then my army reserve legal detachment was activated and sent to Iraq, and I found myself
working for the Army Criminal Investigation Command. Lawyers working for cops, my fellow
JAG attorneys laughed; *what’s the world coming to.*

The Colonel gave me his *don’t bullshit me* look.

I began to brief him on the incident and he quickly interrupted me. “Stop talking to me like I’m a judge to whom you’re trying to justify some client’s illegal actions. Give me the five W’s.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, and summarized the who-what-where-when-and-why as he had drilled into me in Iraq. “Two weeks ago, an investigator with the state police contacted me. They were conducting an unrelated surveillance at a marina in Southampton, when they saw Congressman O’Dell, a defense contractor, and two women board a private yacht. The police and Coast Guard tracked the yacht, collected numerous photos, and compiled a full activity log. The boat with the same four people returned to the marina the following afternoon. Both of the women were identified as high-class escorts.”

“Isn’t O’Dell the guy who campaigns for family values with his wife by his side?”

“Yes, and he’s on the appropriations and armed services subcommittees.”

The Colonel looked at his watch, the same old Rolex diving watch he wore in Iraq. “Three minutes,” he said, and returned to the grill and flipped the steaks. “When you transferred over to the U.S. Attorney’s Office after Iraq, you made quite a name for yourself prosecuting the dirty politicians in New Jersey. According to my sources, you’re quite the hotshot over there. They’re looking at you for Division Chief, and you might find yourself on the short list for a U.S. Attorney slot before you’re fifty. You know how to handle this situation. Don’t pretend you don’t.”

I studied my sneakers for a few counts, then remade eye contact. “I reported the incident to my boss. He told me he’d handle it and to not mention it to anyone else.”
“Sounds like they already have an open, but rather hush-hush case on the congressman.”

“I spoke to a buddy at the AG’s Office and a contact with the FBI’s political corruption unit. Both say there’s no active case.” The Colonel’s eyes continued to bore into me as I spoke. I felt him trying to suck additional information out of me beyond the words I uttered.

“So you think they intend to bury this?”

I nodded.

“I personally don’t give a shit about the prostitute. That’s between him, his wife, and his conscience, but if a defense contractor is giving him a weekend on a yacht with a hooker, he wants something in return or has already gotten it. That needs to be investigated, and you know it.”

His words hung in the soft summer air alongside the smell of the freshly mowed grass. The deer looked up again, as if in agreement.

He glanced at his watch. “Has the current administration appointed a new U.S. Attorney for New York yet?”

“Yes, James Miller was just confirmed last month.”

The Colonel paused and his eyes flicked up and away, searching for an answer. In two counts, his eyes came back down. “Miller’s a democrat—the President wouldn’t appoint him if he weren’t. So is O’Dell. Democrat or Republican—doesn’t matter—they protect their own. Would your boss make a decision like this without consulting Miller or the AG’s Office?”

“No way.”

“So, the issue is not what’s right. You know that. It’s a matter of character—whether or not you have the courage to do the right thing,” he said, raising his eyebrows.

I knew he was right.
His face softened and he spoke quietly. “If you do the right thing and bring this into the light, you might find yourself lucky to get a job prosecuting cattle rustlers in Montana. I’d like to see you remain in a position where you can continue to do good things for our nation.” He glanced at his watch again. “Three minutes.”

He lifted the grill lid, looked toward the porch where Cathy and Beth were busy chatting, then turned off the four burners and quietly lowered the lid. “Are we ready to eat?” I asked.

“Three more minutes. They’re still cooking.”

“But you turned the heat off. I thought you said you grill each side for four minutes.”

The Colonel half smiled. “After cooking, meat needs to rest before you cut into it.”

“Sure, everyone knows that. If you cut right into it, all the juices run out and make it dry.”

“But Cathy insists it be served hot right off the grill. We used to argue over this. I showed her proof where all the expert chefs say meat needs to rest after cooking, but she still insisted otherwise,” he said. “I can’t serve meat without it resting. That would be wrong.”

“And you always do what’s right,” I smiled, following his logic.

“I don’t need to battle with Cathy over this. She can think I’m doing it her way, yet I can do what’s right and not have to prove she’s wrong. And everyone still gets a perfect, juicy steak.”

I laughed for the first time in weeks.

“After dinner, you and I will grab a cigar and sit out back for a while like we used to do in Baghdad. We’ll war-game this and come up with a way where you can do what’s right while preventing the good people from getting hurt.”

I felt the weight of the last few weeks slide off my shoulders. Even though he just
shouldered part of the burden himself, the Colonel actually seemed to stand taller.

The Colonel looked at his Rolex. “Nine minutes are up. Let’s get this food on the table.”
My toes peeked out from the suds of my too-hot bubble bath. *I’m so glad I have pretty feet*, I thought. *It would suck not being able to wear open-toed shoes.* Moses tapped on the door and walked in the bathroom before I told him whether to come in or stay out. He had my cell phone in one hand and a bong in the other.

“I’m too comfortable to move.” I rested my head on the tub’s rim and sighed. “Will you shotgun me?”

Mo pulled a Bic from his pocket and lit the bowl. He inhaled, bubbling the bong water and filling the it with smoke.

“You can’t clear that,” I said.

He smiled, trying to contain a laugh with his kips pressed inside the chamber.

He pulled the pin and expertly evacuated the smoke.
With his breath held, Mo knelt down next to the tub and we pressed our open mouths together. He exhaled into me, while I tried to breathe in at the same rate.

I felt a cough coming, but tried so hard to stifle it and enjoy Mo’s closeness. He must have felt me tightening up. Right as he raised his head, I hacked smoke into his face. And kept hacking. Watering eyes. Full body convulsions. Such an unattractive movement for the naked body.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “I didn’t know when to stop.”

Instantly stoned, I didn’t have the sense to apologize for nearly choking inside his mouth.

“Don’t worry about it,” I rasped.

A shock of cold air followed Mo’s exit. I sunk my head down into the water for warmth. When I came back up my elbow knocked my phone from the edge of the tub onto the tile. *Fuck.*

I picked it up and read the screen. Two missed calls. One voicemail. I remembered why Moses came in. When my dad tracked me down just to give me my phone I wanted to tell him to fuck off. With Moses, it was kind of sweet that he didn’t want me to miss a call, or a chance to make some money selling an ounce or two. But, really, if I were that worried about it, I’d carry my phone on a string around my neck.

Jodi called. Twice.

I called my voicemail and played her message.

“Hey, it’s Jodi,” she slurred. “How are you? I hope okay. I just want to say I’m sorry and I miss you. I miss you, okay? I should’ve come with you. I should have—” the phone cut out.

I slept with Jodi a few times in college before she dropped out junior year and moved to Rockwall with her mother. They had probably been busy collecting cats in the two years since we last talked. I had transferred from North Texas to Texas at Austin the next semester.
I didn’t call Jodi back. Since her there had mostly been men. And my stoned mind couldn’t lock down a single substantial memory. I thought about the time we dropped acid at Six Flags, but I think that may have been with Mandy. I couldn’t remember doing anything with Jodi besides $2-U-Call-Its at Andy’s on Tuesdays. What else is there to do in Denton besides drink and fuck? Poor Jodi. It must be sad hanging on to something that didn’t every really happen.

I pulled the plug, and stayed in the tub until all the water drained. Little pockets of water pooled under me, trapped before reaching the drain. The rest of my body air-dried, and I didn’t move until re-acclimating to room temperature.

I peaked into the living room as I walked down the hall in my towel. Ashley was sitting next to Mo on the couch. She lived in another condo in our building. Some married guy paid her rent, but she spent all her utility money on weak fixes. She came over to our place for free drugs and cable-on-demand.

I put on a low cut tank top and a pair of shorts that flattered my ass, in case Mo was into me. When I came back into the living room, Ashley was writhing around on the rug in front of the TV. She was wearing a black dress with a shitty sequence-like material, probably from Forever 21. The back was cutout, and she wasn’t wearing a bra. She was in a drunk girls’ version of downward dog. The bottoms of her ass cheeks peeked out and her tits bulged from front of her dress as she rolled her head around on my Persian, mumbling a song. Ashley un-ironically listened to Ke$ha.

Two randoms were on the couch. The table was covered with backwash bottomed beer bottles filled with soggy cigarettes. The guys didn’t acknowledge me. The one with a flat-brimmed Yankees hat sat laughing at Ashley, who had a carpet burn forming on her forehead.
The other—a short guy with an over-manicured beard—was busy chopping up lines on the glass surface of the end table.

I knocked on Mo’s door. “Yeah,” he said.

“What the fuck is going on out there?”

“Ashley took too much X.”

“How many tabs did you give her?”

“I didn’t give her shit. I only have mollies right now. It’s fuckin’ Ashley. Who knows where she got it, and what it’s laced with.”

“Do you know who the randoms are?” I asked.

“Some dudes she brought home from the sixth street.”

“Doesn’t she know sixth street is only for tourists and teenagers. And poor people.” I closed the door behind me. “I’m just going to chill in here until they leave.”

Mo and I stayed up pretty late doing the little bit of coke he had in his room. We played Mario Brothers on his old school Nintendo. It was in pristine condition. He even had the track mat and the Duck Hunt guns. Mo rarely let anyone play.

I was too wired to make a move on him. He always had good coke. He fell asleep while I was still intense on Level 7. I turned off the console and headed for my own bed.

The living room light was still on, so I reached around the wall to flip the switch. Ashley was passed out naked on the floor. Her dress and thong were on the rug next to her. Her face bloody and swollen. The randoms probably took turns fucking her before they left. I stepped over her to lock the front door and then went back to my room. I considered grabbing a Sharpie and writing dumb bitch on Ashley’s face, but I figured she wouldn’t need my help figuring that out.