

Can you have it all?
Or will you always want more?

INDISCRETION

CHARLES DUBOW



Charles Dubow

Indiscretion

Аннотация

The Great Gatsby meets The Secret History in this torrid novel of love, lust and deception. Harry and Madeleine Winslow are blessed with talent, money, and charm. Harry is an award-winning author on the cusp of greatness. Madeleine is a woman of sublime beauty and grace whose elemental goodness belies a privileged upbringing. Bonded by deep devotion, their marriage is both envied and admired by friends who spend summers at their East Hampton idyll. When a holiday fling turns disastrously wrong, 26-year-old Claire falls into the Winslows' welcoming orbit. They are enchanted by her youth and intelligence. In turn, Claire is entranced by Harry and Maddy. The love that exists between them is something of which, until now, she could only dream. Seen through the omniscient eyes of Maddy's childhood friend Walter, Indiscretion is a story about the complexities of love, the dangerous nature of desire and how obsession can tear apart even the most perfect of worlds. This ebook edition also contains an extended extract from Maggie Shipstead's award-winning, New York Times bestseller, Seating Arrangements.

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INDISCRETION

Charles Dubow



blue door

About the Book

‘Every story has a narrator. Someone who writes it down after it’s all over. Why am I the narrator of this story? I am because it is the story of my life—and of the people I love most ...’

Harry and Madeleine Winslow are blessed with talent, money, and charm. Harry is an award-winning author on the cusp of greatness. Madeleine is a woman of sublime beauty and grace whose elemental goodness belies a privileged upbringing. Bonded by deep devotion, their marriage is both envied and admired by friends who spend summers at their East Hampton idyll.

When a holiday fling turns disastrously wrong, 26-year-old Claire falls into the Winslows’ welcoming orbit. They are enchanted by her youth and intelligence. In turn, Claire is entranced by Harry and Maddy. The love that exists between them is something of which, until now, she could only dream.

Seen through the omniscient eyes of Maddy’s childhood friend Walter, a narrator akin to Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*, *Indiscretion* is a story about the complexities of love, the dangerous nature of desire and how obsession can tear apart even the most perfect of worlds.

Praise for *Indiscretion*

‘An epic novel of friendship, betrayal and undying love ... outstanding’ *Kirkus*

‘An elegant début’ *Publishers Weekly*

‘Dubow has pulled off something remarkable: a finely tuned, perfectly pitched literary novel with the urgency of a tensely plotted thriller’ Chris Pavone, author of *The Expats*

‘*Indiscretion* richly delves into the complex permutations of love. Dubow writes with nuanced precision, and his characters are captivatingly real’ Kate Christenson, author of *The Astral*

About the Author

Charles Dubow was born in New York City and spent his summers at his family's house on Georgica Pond in East Hampton (the primary setting for *Indiscretion*). He was educated at Wesleyan University and New York University. He has worked as a roustabout, a lumberjack, a shepherd in New Zealand, a congressional aide and was a founding editor of Forbes.com and later an editor at Businessweek.com. He lives in New York City with his wife Melinda, children William and Lally, and a Labrador Retriever named Luke. *Indiscretion* is his first novel.

To Melinda

E cosi desio me mena

(And so desire carries me away)

PETRARCH

Great lovers lie in Hell ...

JOHN CROWE RANSOM

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PROLOGUE

THE POET A. E. HOUSMAN WROTE OF THE “LAND OF LOST content,” and how he can never return to the place where he had once been so happy.

When I was younger, I greatly admired the poem’s sentiment because I was not old enough to realize how banal it was. The young invariably cherish their youth, incapable of imagining life past thirty. The notion that the past is more idyllic is absurd, however. What we remember is our innocence, strong limbs, physical desire. Many people are shackled by their past and are unable to look ahead with any degree of confidence because they not only don’t believe in the future, they don’t really believe in themselves.

But that doesn’t prevent us from casting a roseate glow over our memories. Some memories burn brighter, whether because they meant more or because they have assumed greater importance in our minds. Holidays blur together, snowstorms, swimming in the ocean, acts of love, holding our parents’ hands when we are very small, great sadnesses. But there is much we forget too. I have forgotten so much—names, faces, brilliant conversations, days and weeks and months, things I vowed never to forget, and to fill in the gaps, I conflate the past or make it up entirely. Did that happen to me or to someone else? Was that me who broke his leg skiing in Lech? Did I run from the carabinieri

after a drunken night in Venice? Places and actions that seem so real can be entirely false, based purely on impressions of a story told at the time and then somehow subconsciously woven into the fabric of our lives.

After a while it becomes real.

SUMMER

1

ELEVEN IN THE MORNING. THE BACKYARDS OF HOUSES RUMBLE by. Here and there an aboveground pool, discarded patio furniture, rusting bicycles. Barking dogs tied with ropes. Dry lawns. The sky is a pale blue, the heat of early summer just beginning to unfurl itself. Every fifteen minutes or so the train stops. More people get on than off.

Day-trippers look for empty seats on the crowded, noisy, brightly lit train. They carry bags filled with sunblock, bottles of water, sandwiches, and magazines. The women wear bathing suits under their clothes, bursts of neon color knotted around their necks. The men, young, tattooed, muscular, the buds of iPods wired to their ears, wear backward baseball caps, shorts, and flip-flops, towels draped around their necks, ready for a Saturday at the beach.

Claire is joining them. But she is not with them. I am not there either. We haven't met yet, but I can imagine her. If I close my eyes I can still remember the sound of her voice, the way she walks. She is young, alluring, hurtling to a destination that will change her life, and mine, forever.

She huddles against the window, trying to concentrate on her book, but puts it down every few moments to look out at the passing landscape. The jolting of the train makes her sleepy. The trip feels like it is taking longer than it is, and she wishes

she were there already. Silently, she urges the train to go faster. Her backpack, the one she carried around Europe, is on the seat beside her, and she hopes no one asks her to move it. She knows it is too big, and it looks as though she is coming to stay for a week or a month and not just a night. Her roommate had taken the other bag, the one on wheels which they shared, on a business trip. She opens her book and tries again to focus on the words, but it's no use. It's not that it's a bad book. She has been meaning to read it since it first came out. The author is one of her favorites. Maybe she will read it on the beach later if there is time.

The conductor collects the ticket stubs. He has a thick, reddish mustache and is wearing a worn, light blue short-sleeved shirt and a round, dark blue cap. He has done this trip hundreds of times. "Speonk," he intones nasally, drawing out the last syllable. "Next station Spe-onnnk."

She consults the schedule in her hand. Only a few stations to go.

At Westhampton, the day-trippers begin to get off the train in small groups. Some are meeting friends with cars. High fives and laughter. Others stand around and gather their belongings in the sunlit parking lot, clutching their cell phones to their ears. Their adventures are already beginning. She returns the schedule to her pocket. She has to wait another thirty-eight minutes before she reaches her destination.

At the station Clive is waiting. Go left when you come out, he had told her. I'll be there.

He is tall, blond, English. The tails of his expensive shirt untucked. She has never seen him in shorts before. He is very tan. It has only been a week since she last saw him, but he looks as though he has lived here his whole life. That the handmade suits he normally wears seem to belong to some other man.

He leans over to kiss her on the cheek and picks up her bag. "How long are you planning on staying exactly?" he asks with a smile.

"I knew you were going to say that," she says, wrinkling her nose at him. "No need to panic. Dana took the good bag."

He laughs easily and starts to walk, saying, "I'm just parked over here. Thought I'd run you back to the house, and then we could all grab a spot of lunch."

She hears the mention of others and is surprised but tries not to show it. "Come out for the weekend," he had said, nuzzling her shoulder. "I want you to. It will be very quiet. Just us. You'll love it."

He opens the door of his two-seater and throws her bag behind them. She doesn't know anything about cars, but she can tell it is a nice one. The top is down and the rich-smelling leather is pleasantly hot against the bare backs of her legs.

Although he is older than she, he has the youthfulness that comes to men who have never married. Even if they travel with a woman, there is something unencumbered about them, never having been weighted down by anything more than their own desires.

When she met him, at the party in a loft in Tribeca, then afterward at the restaurant and then bed, he had reminded her of a boy home from school for Christmas trying to squeeze in as much pleasure as possible before it is all over.

“So who else do you have out?” She doesn’t mean to make it sound like an accusation.

“Oh, just the rest of my harem,” he says with a wink. Reaching out, he puts his hand on her thigh. “Don’t worry. Clients. They invited themselves at the last minute, and I couldn’t really say no. Bad form.”

They drive past high green hedgerows, behind which there are occasional glimpses of large houses. Workmen, Mexican or Guatemalan maybe, dart in and out, pushing lawn mowers, clipping branches, cleaning pools, raking gravel, their battered pickup trucks parked inoffensively on the side of the road. Other people are on the roads too. Men and women jogging, some on bikes, one or two nannies pushing strollers. Sunlight twinkles between the leaves. The whole world seems manicured, verdant, private.

They turn down a gravel drive lined with newly planted saplings.

“Can’t tell you how long it’s taken to get this bloody place ready,” says Clive. “Nearly strangled my contractor when he told me it wouldn’t be done by Memorial Day. They only just finished the pool last week. Can you imagine? Bought it over a year ago. Bloody nerve of some people.”

They pull up to the house. It is modern, white. Several cars are parked in front. A Range Rover and two Mercedeses. She has never seen grass so green in her life.

Carrying her bag, Clive ushers her through the door into a large, dark, soaring room. A fireplace dominates one wall, a modern painting the other. She recognizes the artist. She had been to one of his shows that spring.

“Do you like it?” he asks. “Not really my thing. I know bugger-all about art. But my decorator said I needed a whacking great painting there so I bought it.”

The ceiling must be thirty feet high. There is almost no furniture, only a long white leather couch and a number of cardboard boxes stacked in the corner.

“The rest should be here next week,” he says. “We’re just camping out now. Come on, let me give you the grand tour.”

He sets down her bag and leads her through the house, showing her the dining room, the kitchen, a media room, and a game room complete with pool table, Foosball, Ping-Pong, and a pinball machine. In every room, a wide, flat television.

“Typical male,” she says, knowing what he wants to hear. “You can’t be bothered to furnish your new house, but you’ve already got all the toys set up.” He grins, flattered.

“Let me show you where you’ll be staying.” They go back the way they came and he carries her bag into a large master bedroom, where the bed sits unmade, shoes kicked across the floor, clothes draped over a chair, and a laptop on the desk open

to Bloomberg. Magazines and cell phones are scattered on the bedside table. On the dresser is a photo of Clive posing with skis and another with a young woman on what appears to be a sailboat. Without looking closely Claire can tell she is topless.

“Sorry, it’s a bit of a mess. Didn’t get a chance to tidy. Hope you don’t mind.” As if he hadn’t expected her to answer, he turns and kisses her. “I really am glad you could come.”

“Me too,” she says, returning the kiss. She needs to pee. The trip out was long, and she is hot and uncomfortable. He places his hand on her breast, and she lets him. She likes the way he touches her and the way he smells. Leather and sand. That he is English. It is like being ravished by a Regency duke. His hand is now under her shirt and her nipples are hardening. She doesn’t want to break away and decides she can wait. It is over quickly. He didn’t even bother removing her top or his. Her panties are around one ankle, and she is sitting on the bed while he washes up in the bathroom.

“We’ve just inaugurated the bedroom,” he calls to her.

Unfulfilled, she stares down at her naked legs and black pubic hairs, feeling vaguely foolish.

He comes back out. “Right, let’s go meet the others, shall we?”

“One moment.” She goes into the bathroom now, carrying her underwear and shorts. There didn’t seem any point in putting them on first. The bathroom is large and covered in marble. The towels decadently soft. There are two sinks, a bidet, and a shower with multiple heads in gleaming steel that probably cost her entire

salary. There is another television screen, this one concealed behind the mirror. She splashes water on her face and wishes she had thought to bring in her toiletries. She has no hairbrush, no lipstick.

“Come on then,” calls Clive. “I’m famished.”

She walks out. “You look gorgeous, darling,” he says, swiveling his hips. “Fancy another go?” He winks and gives her a peck on the cheek. “Here, thought you might like this.” He hands her a glass of champagne like a reward. He is carrying another. “Don’t want to get too far behind everyone else. They’ve got a head start.”

By the pool are two other couples, the women reclining on chaises and the men at a table with a champagne bucket on it. It is very hot now, and she blinks in the sunlight. She is introduced to Derek and a blond woman who makes no attempt to rise. Her name is possibly Irina, but Claire doesn’t quite catch it. She looks for a ring and sees there isn’t one. The woman has an accent Claire can’t place, and looks quite tall. She is in good shape. Derek is stubby and also English and wears a red Manchester United shirt. On his wrist is a fat, diamond-encrusted watch. He was in the middle of telling a funny story and clearly didn’t like being interrupted.

The other couple is married. “Larry,” says a portly, balding man with glasses, “and this is my wife, Jodie.” Jodie smiles at Claire, turning her head just enough to inspect her. She, too, is wearing an expensive watch. And several glittering rings. They

are all wearing expensive watches. Claire doesn't wear a watch.

Jodie is around forty and has a taut, trimmed stomach that flattens into an orange bikini. Her breasts look too good to be natural. "So where did you two meet?" she asks, taking a sip of champagne. Claire notices that Jodie's fingernails and toenails are painted burnt gold. The veins on her feet and forearms stand out.

"At a party in New York a few weeks ago," says Claire. "It was ..."

"It was love at first sight, wasn't it, darling?" says Clive with a laugh, sliding his arm around her waist.

"Speak for yourself," responds Claire playfully. "Handsome English hedge fund managers are a dime a dozen these days."

Jodie smiles. She has been here before. Has met his other women. Clive preens.

"Right, chaps," he announces. "I don't have a bite of food in the house, and even if I did I'm a rotten cook, so I've booked lunch. Let's drink up and go."

Lunch takes most of the afternoon. There is caviar followed by grilled lobster and more wine. It is Clive's treat. "My shout," he said when they sat down. "Order whatever costs the most."

Even though it is hot, they sit outside under large green umbrellas looking over a harbor full of sailboats. Clive points out to Long Island Sound and, in the distance, Connecticut. It was an old whaling port, he says, once one of the biggest on the East Coast. "Settled by an Englishman, of course," he says. "A bit of

a soldier of fortune named Lion Gardiner. The family still owns an entire island in the Sound that was given them by Charles the First. Must be why I feel so drawn to the place. I think old Lion and I would have been great mates.”

Seagulls wheel overhead. Occasionally a particularly brave one lands and is then shooed away by a waiter. Claire is seated between Clive and Larry, but the men just talk across at each other, and there doesn't seem to be much point in trying to join in because most of the conversation is about either the derivatives market or English football, of which both Clive and Derek are big fans.

As a result Claire drinks more wine than she should and begins to wonder when she could get the earliest train back to New York. Would Clive drive her to the station or would she have to call a taxi? He would be annoyed. She is silently relieved when he proposes a trip to the beach. The other two women make vague noises about not liking the sand and can't they all just go back to the pool, but they are shouted down by Clive and the other men.

After a quick stop by the house to change, Clive piles everyone into his Range Rover—"I'm the only one with a beach sticker and the bloody cops like nothing better than handing out parking tickets on weekends in June"—and Claire sits in the back between Jodie and Larry. Derek sits in front with tall Irina perched comically on his broad lap. When they arrive at the crowded beach, Clive, carrying a cooler, marches down close to the water and stops on a tiny patch of unoccupied

sand between two other groups. “You can still get a decent cell phone signal here,” he says, opening a complicated nylon folding chair. Claire is holding the towels, a nanny visiting the beach with her employers. The others are straggling behind. Jodie is complaining. “My hat’s going to blow away, dammit,” she says. “Christ, why’d we have to come here?”

Claire looks out at the sparkling blue water and the small foam-tipped waves gently crashing against the sand. Children are playing, laughing and diving through the surf while parents and babysitters stand in the shallows and watch. It is still early in the season, and the water is too cold for most swimmers. The cloudless sky stretches endlessly back beyond the curve of the world. She wishes she were here alone.

“More wine?” asks Clive. He is filling glasses.

She shakes her head. “No thanks. It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“There’s a reason why these houses cost so much, love. See that one over there? It sold last summer for forty million. There’s one down there that sold for twenty million the other year. The new owner tore it down and put up an even bigger one.”

“You couldn’t give me one of those houses,” says Larry. “You know what the upkeep is on one of those things? Salt damage, dune erosion, hurricanes, taxes? Only an asshole with more money than brains would buy one.”

“That’s why I bought one well inland, old boy. I’m an asshole with money and brains,” Clive adds with a wink.

Jodie walks up. “Do we have to stay? My hair is getting

ruined.”

Clive has taken off his shirt. His torso is as tanned as his face, the muscles lean. He is a fitness enthusiast, one who practices yoga every day, goes to the gym regularly, pops vitamins. Claire can see the other women admiring him, envying her. She knows that body, has felt it, tasted it. But she has never seen it outside the bedroom. In the sunlight. She looks away, conscious of her desire. Her own arms are pale. She has never been able to get tan the way Clive can. She freckles instead.

“Oh, don’t worry about your hair, darling,” Clive says. “The windswept look is very fashionable out here.”

“You’re a riot, Clive. I just had it done and it wasn’t cheap.” A light wind gusts and blows off her hat. “Shit! Larry!”

She glares at her husband, who goes scurrying after the hat.

“What did I tell you?” she says when he returns. It is all his fault. He is the man. He should have been protecting her. Larry grimaces and says, “Clive, can you drive us back to the house? Jodie really doesn’t want to stay.” Jodie stands a few feet behind him, victorious, her arms crossed against her torso.

Irina, who has been lying on a towel, says, “I want to go too. I am getting all sand everywhere.”

“All right,” says Clive, throwing up his hands in mock defeat. “Sorry, love. Day at the beach cut short.”

Claire hesitates. “Can I stay?”

“Sorry?”

“I’d like to stay. It’s just so beautiful, and I haven’t seen the

beach in so long. Do you mind? I could take a taxi back if it's too much trouble. I just really want to go for a walk and a swim."

"Water's bloody cold for swimming," says Clive, looking at his watch and then toward the parking lot, where his other guests are now waiting. "Look, I didn't plan on spending the day playing chauffeur, but I could come back for you in half an hour or so, after I've dropped off this lot. That do?"

"Yes, thank you."

He is surprised, she can tell. It has probably been a long time since a woman failed to go along with his plans. In his world that sort of thing isn't supposed to happen. It's a black mark against her. She can tell he is already thinking who he should invite out next weekend. The others are almost back to the parking lot. He turns and follows them, lugging the cooler and the chairs. She feels lighter now.

With a sigh, she looks down the beach and removes her shirt and shorts until she is standing only in her bikini. The sun and wind feel good on her exposed skin. Although it is crowded here, she can see that farther down it thins out. That is where she wants to be, and she starts walking. The sand crunches pleasantly between her toes. The afternoon sun warm against her face. A wave bigger than the others crashes to her left, sending foaming surf rolling up over her feet. Involuntarily she lets out a little shriek and leaps aside. She had forgotten how cold the water could be, but after a few moments she becomes used to it.

When she was a child, her family would go to the beach

every summer. The water was always cold there too. Maybe even colder. They would rent an old, thin-walled house on the Cape, near Wellfleet, for a week. There would be lobsters and sailing and sand in the sheets, her father playing tennis with his old wooden racket and a smell of mildew that saturated the whole house that always made her think of summer. That had been a long time ago, before her parents' divorce.

She passes several surfers bobbing like seals in the small waves and watches them for a while. One of them starts paddling and gets up unsteadily as the wave begins to crest. He manages to stay upright for a few seconds before falling. A pretty girl with long sun-bleached hair claps her hands and whistles. Claire thinks it would be wonderful to know how to surf. If only there was time. She thinks she'd be good at it. She is a good skier and used to dance in high school, so she knows her balance is good and her legs are strong.

Crossing over a seaweed-covered stone jetty that juts out into the ocean, she comes to a stretch of beach that is almost completely deserted. Up ahead in the distance is another jetty, and beyond that what looks like a large lagoon. There are signs posted on hurricane fencing that warn against disturbing a breed of bird called piping plover. Imposing mansions occupy the dunes behind her, but for the moment she feels as though she has the beach all to herself.

The sun is strong and she decides to cool off by going swimming. It is too cold to wade in. She waits for a moment at the

water's edge, timing the waves, gathering her courage. Seeing her chance, she runs in, lifting her legs awkwardly out of the foaming water, and dives into a breaker. The cold shocks her, but she kicks hard and comes out beyond the swells. As she treads water, tasting the salt on her lips, her body feels strong and clean. She starts swimming a breaststroke, but the current is stronger and pushes her back, and she realizes she isn't making much headway. For a moment, she is anxious, concerned that she might not be able to get back to shore. Knowing that to fight the current would be to risk exhaustion, she swims parallel to the shore until she has escaped it. When she no longer feels its pull, she bodysurfs back to the beach, stumbling wearily out of the water.

"You should be careful out there."

She turns to see a man of about forty standing beside her. He is good-looking and well-built, with sandy hair slowly turning gray. There is something recognizable about him. It is a face she has seen before.

"There's a powerful riptide there," he says. "I was watching you when you went in, in case you got into trouble. But you looked like you could take care of yourself."

"Thank you. I wasn't so sure for a moment." She takes a deep breath and realizes her fear has passed. She smiles at him. He is an attractive man. "I didn't realize this was a full-service beach. Are you lifeguards salaried or do you work on commission?"

He laughs. "We work strictly for tips."

"Well, that's too bad. As you can see I'm not carrying any

money.”

“You’d be amazed how many times we lifeguards hear that. Maybe I should go into a more lucrative line of work.”

“Well, you could start a line of bikinis that come with pockets.”

“That’s a great idea. I’ll bring it up at the next lifeguard convention.”

“You should. I hate to think of all those starving lifeguards, saving all those people for nothing. It just doesn’t seem fair.”

“Well, we don’t do it for the money but for the glory—and for the gratitude, of course.”

“In that case, thanks again for almost saving me.”

He makes a little bow. “It was almost my pleasure. Well, so long. Stay out of riptides.”

He walks down the beach in the direction of the lagoon. She watches him get smaller and sees him join a group of people by some canoes. A chill runs through her. She shivers, wishing she had brought a towel. She has to head back anyway. It is getting late. Clive will be waiting.

THAT NIGHT THEY ARE IN THE KITCHEN, READY TO GO OUT. “Where are we going?” Claire asks. She is wearing a simple white dress, low cut over her small breasts. Jodie appears serene. She has forgiven Clive.

“There’s a party. Writer chap I know. Gorgeous wife.”

“I want to go to nightclub,” pouts Irina, applying lipstick while staring at the mirror in her compact. “My friend say they are very

good here. You take me, baby?” This to Derek, whom she towers over, caressing his thinning hair. He grunts in assent. “Ere, what about a nightclub then?”

“Things don’t really get going at the clubs until midnight,” answers Clive. “We’ll have plenty of time.”

“What’s he written?” Claire asks.

“Who?”

“Your writer friend. What’s he written? Would I have heard of it?”

“You may have done. He wrote something that came out the other year. Won a big prize too, I think. I never got around to reading it.”

“What’s his name?”

“Winslow. Harry Winslow. Have you heard of him?”

“Yes. He wrote *The Death of a Privileged Ape*. It won a National Book Award. I loved it.”

“I didn’t like it.” It was Jodie. “You remember?” she says, turning to Larry. “I tried reading it in Anguilla? Bored the crap out of me.”

“Yes, well, my taste in literature runs toward Dick Francis and Jackie Collins, I must say.” Lowbrow Clive to the rescue, but Claire doesn’t give up so easily.

“How do you know him?”

“Harry? He’s a lovely chap. Terribly funny. Wife’s smashing. Not sure how I know them. Just do. Met them at parties, I suppose. They have a house out here. Been in her family for years

apparently, though I think that sort of thing means rather less here than in England.”

“And after we go to nightclub, yes?” puts in Irina.

“Absolutely. After we’ll go to a nightclub, and you and Derek can boogie until dawn.”

THE HOUSE IS CHARMING. LIVED IN, LOVED. IT’S SMALL, TWO stories, the shingles brown with age, the trim white. Cars line the drive, some parked on the grass. A little boy, the son of the family, armed with a flashlight, helps direct them. Through the tall trees, an open field is barely visible in the twilight. The air smells of salt water, the sound of the ocean just audible. Claire wishes she could come back in the daylight. She can tell it would be marvelous.

Inside is the detritus of generations. Family treasures cover the wainscoted walls. It is as though the contents of several larger houses were spilled into one. Old portraits and photographs of men with mustaches and high collars, women with straw boaters and chignons, captains of industry, forgotten cousins; paintings of prized, long-dead horses; posters; books everywhere, on shelves and stacked in piles on the floor; and model airplanes and Chinese porcelain foo dogs and old magazines and fishing rods and tennis racquets and beach umbrellas jammed in the corners. Overhead a dusty, oversize hurricane lamp bathes everything in a soft glow. Children’s toys, scratched tables and scuffed chairs and piles of canvas sneakers, moccasins, and rain boots. The whole place smells of years of mildew, the sea, and woodsmoke.

Claire is the last one in. The noise of the party pours out from other rooms. Clive puts his hand behind her back and brings her up to introduce her to a man with sandy hair. He is shaking hands with the rest of their group.

“It’s my lifeguard!” He is taller than she remembers. He wears an old blazer with a button missing and frayed cuffs. “Saved anyone tonight?”

“Just a few. They were dying of thirst.”

Claire giggles. “Clive, I met this man on the beach this afternoon. Apparently, I went swimming somewhere I shouldn’t have and could have drowned.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

“It was my good deed for the day, Clive,” the man says. “Good thing she’s a strong swimmer. I was afraid I was going to have to go in after her. Last year a teenage boy drowned there.”

“So you’re Harry Winslow?” Now she knows why he looked so familiar.

“I am. Who are you?” He smiles broadly. There is an old scar on his chin. His eyes are gray. A faint trace of wrinkles. He holds out his hand, the nails clean, the fingers tapered. Golden hairs curl around his thick brown wrist.

His hand envelops hers as she introduces herself, a little less confident now. She is surprised that it would be so callused. He is no longer the same man she met on the beach. He has taken on substance in her eyes.

“Well, Claire, welcome. What can I get you to drink?”

“Excuse me,” says Clive. “I see a chap over there. I’ll catch up later, hmm?” Without waiting for Claire to answer, he is gone, smelling money.

“How about that drink, then?”

Claire follows Harry inside a small living room with an old brick fireplace, painted white. She notices large, worn sofas and comfortable reading chairs. He walks to a table piled high with bottles, glasses, and an ice bucket. On the floor, a faded Oriental carpet. The rest of the party is on the porch and the grass out back. She accepts a glass of white wine. He is drinking whisky on the rocks from a chunky glass.

“I read your book.”

“Did you?” he responds. “I hope you liked it.”

He is being modest. It is an act, she can tell. One he has repeated with varying degrees of sincerity. He has had this conversation before. Many people have read his book. It has won prizes. Thousands, maybe millions of people have liked it, even loved it. The success for him is a shield, a gift. It lends him an enviable objectivity.

“I did, very much.”

“Thank you.”

He smiles truthfully. It is like a parent hearing about the achievements of an accomplished child. It is no longer within his control. It has taken on a life of its own.

He looks around. He is the host. There are others to attend to, other drinks to fetch, introductions to be made, stories to be

shared. But she wants him to stay. She tries to will him to stay. Wants to ask him questions, know more about him. What is it like to have your talents recognized, to have your photograph on the back of a book? To be lionized by friends and strangers, to have your face, your hands, your body, your life? But she cannot find the words and would be embarrassed if she did.

“Where are you from?” He sips his drink. He asks the way an uncle asks where a young niece is at school.

“Just outside of Boston.”

“No, I meant where do you live now?”

“Oh.” She blushes. “In New York. I’m sharing an apartment with a friend from college.”

“Known Clive long?”

“Not long. We met at a party in May.”

“Ah,” he says. “He’s supposed to be very good at what he does. I must admit I don’t know the first thing about business. I’m hopeless with money. Always have been.”

Other guests come up. A handsome man and a beautiful woman with exotic looks and dark hair pulled tightly back. “Excuse us,” says the man. They know him. “Darling,” she says, leaning in to offer him her cheek. “Great party. I wish we could stay. Sitter,” he explains. “You know what it’s like.”

They laugh with the intimacy of a private joke, the way rich people complain about how hard it is to find decent help or the expense of flying in a private plane.

The couple leaves. “Excuse me,” Harry says to her. “I need to

fetch more ice. Enjoy the party.”

“I always do what the lifeguard tells me,” she says, making a mock salute but looking him in the eyes and holding his gaze.

He turns but then, as though realizing he is leaving her all alone, says, “Wait. You haven’t met Maddy. Let me introduce you. Come with me.”

Relieved, she follows him happily through the crowd to the kitchen. Unlike the living room, it is bright. Copper pots hang from the walls. Children’s drawings decorate an aging refrigerator. A checked linoleum floor. There is a small, industrious crowd here, some sitting at a long, heavy table, others chopping, washing dishes. On a scarred butcher block table sits a large ham. It is an old kitchen. Worn and welcoming. She could imagine Thanksgivings here.

“Sweetheart,” he says. A woman stands up from the oven, taking out something that smells delicious.

She is wearing an apron and wipes her hands on it. She is taller than Claire and strikingly beautiful. Long red-gold ringlets still wet from the shower and pale blue eyes. No makeup. A patrician face.

“Maddy, this is a new friend of Clive’s.” He has forgotten her name.

“Claire,” she says, stepping forward. “Thank you for having me.”

Maddy takes her hand. A firm grip. Her nails are cut short and unpainted. Claire notices she is barefoot.

“Hello, Claire. I’m Madeleine. Glad you could come.”

She is dazzling. Claire is reminded of Botticelli’s Venus.

“She liked my book,” he says. “Must be nice to the paying customers.”

“Of course, darling,” she says. And then to Claire, “Would you like to help? As usual one of my husband’s cozy little get-togethers has turned into an orgy. We need to feed these people, or they could start breaking things.” She shakes her head theatrically and smiles at him.

“The world’s greatest wife,” he says with an ecstatic sigh.

“I’d be happy to,” says Claire.

“Great. We need someone to plate the deviled eggs. They’re in the fridge and the platters are in the pantry. And don’t worry if you drop anything, nothing’s that good.”

“You’re a wonderful field marshal,” says Harry, giving his wife a kiss on the cheek. “I need to get ice.”

“Check the wine too,” she calls out as he leaves. “We’ve already gone through two cases of white. And where’s that other case of vodka? I thought it was under the stairs.” She begins to plate the canapés from the oven onto a platter.

“Is there anything else I can do?” Claire brings out the deviled eggs.

“Yes. Phil,” she says to the man with the dish towel, “let Claire do that for a while. Take these out and put them on the sideboard.” She turns to Claire. “Is this your first time out here?”

Claire nods. “It’s very beautiful.”

“It’s much grander now than when I was a kid,” she says, slicing a brown loaf of bread, using the back of her wrist to push her hair away from her face. “Back then most of the land around here was farms. The place across the road was a dairy farm. We used to go help with the milking. Now it’s a subdivision for millionaires. Hand me that plate, would you?”

“You’ve always lived here?”

She nods. “We came in the summers. This was the staff cottage. My family owned the big house up the drive.”

“What happened?”

“What always happens. We—my brother, Johnny, and me—had to sell it to pay estate taxes, but we kept this place. I couldn’t bear to part with it entirely. Isn’t that right, Walter?”

This is where I come in. Every story has a narrator. Someone who writes it down after it’s all over. Why am I the narrator of this story? I am because it is the story of my life—and of the people I love most. I have tried to be as scrupulous as possible in my telling of it. I wasn’t a participant in everything that happened, but after I knew the ending, I had to fill in the missing pieces through glimpses that meant nothing to me at the time, memories that flash back with new significance, old legal pads, sentences jotted down in notebooks and on the backs of aging photographs. Even Harry himself, though he didn’t know it. I had no choice other than to try to make sense of it. But making sense of anything is never easy, particularly this story.

I walk over, plucking up one of the canapés and popping it into

my mouth. Bacon and something. It is delicious. “Absolutely, darling. Whatever you say.”

“Oh, shut up. Don’t be an ass.” Then to Claire, “Walter is my lawyer. He knows all about it. Sorry, Walter Gervais, this is Claire. Claire, Walter. Walter is also my oldest friend.”

It’s true. We have known each other since we were children. I live next door.

“Hello, Claire,” I say. “I see Maddy’s already dragooned you into service here at the Winslow bar and grill. I refuse to lift a finger unless it’s to join the other four wrapped around a glass tinkling with ice.”

I fancy myself to be both witty and slightly indolent. I am not really either, though. It’s a persona, one I use to protect myself. In fact, I am quite boring and lonely.

“I don’t mind. I don’t really know too many people here, so it’s nice for me to help,” Claire says.

“You’re lucky,” I say. “I know far too many of the people here. That probably explains why I’m hiding out in the kitchen.”

“Walter’s a big snob. I don’t think he’s made a new friend since he was in prep school,” Maddy says.

“You know, I think you’re right. I already knew all the people worth knowing by then anyway.”

“Claire came with Clive.”

“Right, see? There you go. Just met him. Don’t like him.”

“You don’t know me,” says Claire.

“You’re right. I don’t. Should I?”

Here's the thing about Claire: she is actually quite beautiful, but there is something else about her that makes her stand out. In this world, beauty is as common as a credit card. I will try to put my finger on it.

"That's up to you. But we didn't go to prep school together so it looks like I don't have much of a shot." She smiles.

I smile back. I like her. I can't help myself. I tell Maddy to stop working. Maddy is always working. She is a fiend for activity.

"All right." She puts down the knife. "That's all the food we have in the house anyway. Just about the only thing left is the bluefish in the freezer."

"And those are only any good if you pickle them in gin. Just like me."

Why do I always play the bloody fool around her? It can't be that I am showing off. No, it is Claire I am showing off for now.

"Walter, stop standing around sounding like a moron and go get Claire and me something to drink." Maddy turns to Claire while I'm still in earshot. "You wouldn't know it, but he's actually a hell of a good lawyer."

I could have left this out but I didn't. It appeases my ego. My education was very expensive, and I am a good lawyer. I make a lot of money at it too. I don't really like it, though. Other people's problems at least keep me from thinking too much about my own.

I come back carrying a wine bottle. "Let's go outside and get away from this crowd," I say to Claire. "You come too, Maddy."

The three of us go out the kitchen door. We stand on the damp

grass. Claire has removed her shoes now too. Madeleine lights a cigarette. She is trying to quit. The party is roaring on the other side of the house. It is darker here. A large tree with a swing looms in shadow in front of us. The moon and millions of stars fill the night sky. In the distance we can see the lights of a much bigger house.

“Your parents’ house?” asks Claire.

Madeleine nods. “And to the left is Walter’s. We grew up next door to each other. But he still owns his.” It’s too dark to see my house through the thin brake of trees.

“The law may not be as glamorous as writing books, but it is more consistently remunerative,” I say.

“Don’t believe it,” says Madeleine. “Walter’s rich as sin. Even if he wasn’t a lawyer.”

My great-grandfather was a founder of Texaco. Unlike many other families, though, we were able to hold on to our money.

“Don’t give away all my secrets, Maddy. I want Claire to fall in love with me and not my money.”

“Too bad your money’s the most lovable thing about you.”

Claire says nothing. She is enjoying herself, I can tell. It is like standing next to a fire; she feels warmed by our friendship and grateful we are sharing it with her. She feels she could stay here all night listening to our intimate banter, not wanting to let it go and return to the world that exists outside this house.

But what is she really thinking? It is always so easy to know what’s on Maddy’s mind. There isn’t a deceptive bone in her

body. This one, though, is more difficult. She is more concealed.

MIDNIGHT. THE CROWD HAS THINNED OUT. A SMALL GROUP has gathered on a cluster of old wicker furniture in the corner of the porch. Harry is in the center. Also, a couple named Ned and Cissy Truscott. Ned was Harry's roommate at Yale. A big man, a football player. Now a banker. I have expensively represented his firm on several occasions. In spite of that, we get on quite well. I am fond of them both. Claire is with them, listening like an acolyte. Laughing loudly, showing pretty teeth. She has a lovely laugh. It reminds me of silver bells. Harry is talking. He is a very good storyteller, unsurprisingly.

Clive approaches. He hovers before them, maybe a bit unsteadily, waiting for an opportunity. By this time everyone's had plenty to drink.

"Hello, Clive!" Harry roars. "Come sit down." Harry is drunk now too, but he handles it well. Always has. Tomorrow he'll be up at six, whistling in the kitchen.

"No thanks," says Clive. "Thanks for the party. Claire, we have to go. I promised this lot we'd go dancing, remember?"

"Oh, can't we stay? A few more minutes. I'm having such fun."

"C'mon, stay for one drink," calls Harry. "What do you want to go dancing for? You can dance here."

"Thanks," says Clive with a forced smile. "Houseguests. They want to see all the hot spots. Do the Hamptons properly."

"Suit yourself."

"Come along, Claire."

Reluctantly, she rises. “Thank you very much, Harry. Please tell Maddy how much I enjoyed meeting her.”

Harry stands up too. “Of course. Glad you could come. Watch out for riptides.”

They depart, and Harry begins to tell another funny story.

2

SEVERAL WEEKS PASS. IT IS SATURDAY MORNING. CLAIRE HAS rented a car. She is driving out to Clive's house. She hasn't seen him since that weekend. He's been away, in the Far East, he told her. Or was it Eastern Europe? To her surprise, he has invited her out again. She almost declines, but then he tells her that they've been invited for dinner at the Winslows'. How do I know this? I was also invited. What's interesting is I think that it was my idea.

"You don't need to rent a car," Clive had protested. It was a lot of money for her, but she had insisted. She didn't tell him why. She told me later that she hated feeling dependent on him, had wanted to be able to go where she wanted, when she wanted.

As she got closer to Southampton and Route 27 became increasingly congested, she began to regret her decision to drive out. The sun is high over the barren scrub pines that line the highway, and it reflects off the roofs of a thick stream of expensive cars heading east, blocking her way. They inch forward past gas stations and motels, car dealerships and farm stands. None of the glamour is visible from this road. Cars speed past in the opposite direction on the other side of the median. Claire is hot and irritable. Even the radio is annoying her.

When Clive's call came, she had almost stopped thinking about him and was ready to move on. Her roommate, Dana,

said she was crazy to dump a rich, handsome Englishman with a house in the Hamptons during the summer. She should at least wait until the fall.

She asks herself, not for the first time, why she is doing this. She knows she will have sex with Clive. He is an exciting if selfish lover, but she is no longer interested. It will mean nothing, a small price to be paid for admittance. She will spread her legs for him, and then, when he is finished, she will close them up again and go to sleep, both having gotten what they wanted. I can imagine her. She will make the noises required, rake her nails across his back, gasp appropriately, sigh appreciatively. She is not what she seems.

Who is she exactly? She is half French, she will later tell me. Proud of the fact. It makes her more exotic. Her father was an American officer with an Irish name, a graduate of an undistinguished college, dashing in his uniform and generous with his small paycheck. Her parents had met while he was on furlough in Paris from his base in Germany. Her mother was younger, barely out of convent school. An only child, the daughter of older parents. The father a professor at the École Normale Supérieure. They lived in an old house in Asnières-sur-Seine, a suburb that is perhaps best known for being the home of the Louis Vuitton family. I have been there. It is surprisingly bourgeois.

Her mother married her father shortly before his discharge. It was a small ceremony held in the local Catholic church.

Another soldier was best man. It had been a hasty affair, the small bump that was to become Claire barely noticeable under her mother's dress. Afterward they came to live in his hometown in Massachusetts, near Worcester. Before long there was another baby, Claire's younger brother. But her mother could never adapt to the harsh winters or reserved inhabitants of New England. The language had been difficult for her. Her accent too strong, too foreign. Claire remembers her mother withdrawing to her room for hours, days, when the long, dark months enfolded their town. She began to smile again only with the return of spring. Meanwhile, Claire's father strove. He worked as a salesman, then a stockbroker. They bought a new house, a large Victorian in a dreary neighborhood. He had prospered but never became rich. There had been good years and bad. A green Jaguar that once adorned the driveway was replaced by a Buick. Claire had her own room, as did her brother. She went to school, earned high marks, learned how to ice skate and kiss boys. Their mother taught them French and on Sundays took them to Mass.

Every year Claire's mother returned to Paris to visit her parents, bringing Claire and her brother. Claire hated these trips. She found her grandparents old and distant, relics of another century, another life. What she liked best were the walks through the streets and parks of Paris. It was a world unimaginable to her classmates, who had barely been beyond the aging factories that surrounded their town, and who considered Boston as distant as the moon. She would see French boys her age and pretend

that she was meeting them, that they were waiting for her. They would let her smoke their cigarettes and ride behind them on their motor scooters, her hands clasped tightly around their thin, hard bellies. Instead she and her mother and brother dutifully toured the Louvre and visited cafés where they would invariably order the prix fixe. Once, for a special treat, their father joined them, and they traveled down to Nice for a week by the beach. By then her grandfather was dead, and her grandmother had become even more remote, sitting in an old chair by the window in that familiar, oppressive room amid stale biscuits and the smell of decay. That had been the last trip. Shortly after, her parents divorced.

Her father remarried. He moved to Belmont, and before long his wife gave birth to a daughter. He was starting over. Claire was sixteen. She lived with her mother in their old house and communicated with her father on holidays and birthdays. By the time she went off to college, two years later, she had learned that love did not give itself freely. That if she wanted it, it had to be taken. The protective shell that had been slowly growing around her finally hardened into place. She did not resent her father. She only knew that neither of them had much to say to each other. A few weeks after she had moved to New York he had sent her a small check. In a brief note he had written *I hope this will help you get started*, but she had left the check uncashed for many months, despite her low salary, and finally tore it up. He never mentioned it to her.

When Claire was in college her mother moved back to take care of her own mother. After the old lady died, her mother inherited a little money and the apartment, which she sold. She did not remarry. Claire had visited once. Her mother was living outside of Paris in the former royal city of Senlis, in a little apartment near the cathedral. She looked older but more serene. Around her neck she wore a small gold cross. They were more like two old friends chatting than mother and daughter. When Claire left, her mother embraced her but said nothing.

All that was years before. Now Claire was a member of that tribe of independent females, working without guarantees or guidance in the city, hoping to find love and, if not love, success or something like it. She was not promiscuous but she was available, which explains Clive and the men who had come before him and would no doubt follow.

The traffic had been worse than Claire expected. When she arrives at Clive's house they are already late for dinner. "You took your bloody time getting here," he says, offering her a perfunctory kiss. He is already dressed, a glass of champagne in his hand. He does not offer her one. "Sorry, traffic," she says, hurrying into the bedroom to shower quickly and change.

Five minutes later she is rushing down the front steps, carrying her shoes while Clive waits in his car, the motor already running. "All right?" he says, barely waiting for her to close her door before accelerating down the drive, spitting gravel over the grass. She will swipe lipstick across her mouth and brush her hair in

the car. "I told you it was silly to drive out," he says. "I would have been happy to collect you at the station." She ignores Clive's rudeness. It is not him she has come to see.

When they arrive at the Winslows', it is still light. In the west the sky is turning a startling mix of orange and purple. Harry greets them at the door. He is unconcerned about the time. "Come on in," he says, his hair still wet from the shower. His light blue shirt clinging damply. His nose is sunburned. "Look at that sunset," he says, presenting it like a gift.

Claire offers him her cheek and feels his lips lightly brush her skin. "Thank you so much for having us," she says. "I was so happy when Clive told me."

"Our pleasure," responds Harry. "You made a big impression on Maddy. Let me get you guys something to drink."

The house is more magical to her than before. There is no crush of party guests talking, laughing, flirting. Tonight it has reverted to its own quiet, private self, a house where a family lives, where secrets are shared and kept. On the wall she sees a small painting she hadn't noticed before. A seascape. On a faded, elaborately carved frame a tiny brass nameplate with the name of the artist. Winslow Homer. She is surprised and impressed. Claire wishes she could inspect everything, study the photographs, learn the language.

Harry is at the bar. We have a running joke. Whenever one of us or, as it happened once, all of us find ourselves in Venice, we go to the famed Harry's Bar right off St. Mark's and swipe

an ashtray or coaster to bring back to the bar here. On the wall is a photograph of Harry standing proprietarily in front of the frosted double doors, grinning madly. Maddy took the picture on their honeymoon.

“Wonderful day today,” he says. “Ned rented a boat in Montauk and we each caught a shark. Jesus, it was incredible.”

He uncorks a bottle of wine, wincing. “Cut the hell out of my hand, though.” Harry holds up his palm. Claire and Clive can see it is red and blistered. Calmly, gently, Claire reaches out and takes his hand and holds it in her own, running her fingers over the ravaged skin.

“It must hurt very much,” she says.

“Oh, it looks worse than it is.” His hand escapes to the glass. “Most of the red is iodine.”

“What did you do with the shark?” asks Clive.

“Going to have it mounted. Hang it on the wall over there. It’ll be quite the conversation piece. You know what people are like out here. It’ll drive ’em nuts,” he adds, laughing.

They walk outside to the porch. On the lawn Ned is throwing gentle spirals to a little blond boy. Claire recognizes him as the boy with the flashlight from the night of the party. They stop when they see them, and the boy waves.

“That’s Johnny,” says Harry. “Johnny, come here and say hello to our guests.”

The boy runs to them, his tanned legs long and skinny like a colt’s. Claire sees he has his mother’s blue eyes above a sun-

freckled nose.

“How do you do?” he says in a soft voice, putting out his hand the way he has been taught. But he is a shy boy. He does not look them in the eye.

“How do you do, mate?” says Clive.

“Hello, Johnny,” says Claire, squatting so she is at eye level with the boy. “I’m Claire. How old are you?”

I am studying her. She is good with children. It is obvious. I imagine she must have worked as an au pair during college. She would have been their best friend.

“Eight.” His voice is nearly inaudible, but at least he is looking directly into Claire’s eyes. “But I’m almost nine.”

“Almost nine? That makes you very grown-up. I’m twenty-six. What do you like to do? I like to sail and read books.”

“My daddy writes books.”

“I know. I read his book. It was wonderful.”

Johnny smiles. Harry puts his hand on his son’s shoulder. “All right, buddy. It’s time for your supper. What do you say?”

“Good night. It was nice to meet you.”

He goes into the house. Claire watches him go, already in love. He is my godson.

Ned comes up. Despite his size, he is surprisingly quick. I have seen him play tennis. He can still beat men years younger and many pounds lighter. “Hey there.” To Harry he says, “He’s getting a good arm. He’ll make the team yet.”

Harry smiles abstractedly. Claire senses he is thinking about

something else. "Hockey players can do everything football players do, but we do it on ice and backwards," he says. Then to Claire and Clive, "You should see Johnny's slap shot."

"Only girls slap." Ned grins.

They speak in the shorthand of their youth. The two ex-jocks. Members of DKE. Harry was on the hockey team. In his senior year, he was captain.

I remember long, cold nights in Ingalls Rink, huddling under a blanket with Maddy, sharing my flask of bourbon, watching Harry skate. He was good, very good. She couldn't take her eyes off him. His hair was longer then, blonder. He would look up at her every time he scored a goal, seeking her approval, knowing in his heart that he already had it. Already they were inseparable.

Madeleine Wakefield was the most beautiful woman at school. She was the most beautiful woman anywhere she went. Men hovered around her but she had become inured to such attentions. Magazine editors and photographers had asked her to model, but she always said no. To her, beauty was nothing earned. It was a fact, like being left-handed, and it was nothing she ever thought about. While the other girls would dress up for parties, borrowing clothes from roommates, pulling earrings that their mothers had given them for a special night from the backs of their drawers, Maddy never tried. Her normal costume was an old shirt of her father's, a baggy sweater, blue jeans. Still, wherever she went, the men would forget their dates and stare at her, although few of them were bold enough to approach her, sensing there was

something different about her, incapable of knowing the true self beneath that beauty.

I knew, of course. We had always talked about going to Yale together, but after her girls' school in Maryland and my prep school in Massachusetts, the reality was almost better than the dream. She had a car back then. A vintage red MG convertible that had been a present from her grandmother, with the plates MWSMG. Freshman year had been a blur of weekends in Manhattan, nightclubs, and bleary last-minute dashes up I-95 to make it, hungover and hilarious, to classes on Monday morning.

And then, in our sophomore year, she fell in love with Harry. We were in different residential colleges. He in Davenport, Maddy and I in Jonathan Edwards. We had seen him, of course. In Mory's, where he was usually surrounded by his friends, drinking beer or celebrating his latest victory. He was popular and, honestly, it is impossible to imagine him otherwise. Maddy instantly disliked him, which I should have known as a sign. "He's very full of himself," she had said, on those nights when it was just us, which it was most nights. She wanted to make fun of him and to despise him for what she saw in herself. But, in hindsight, it was like watching two lions circling each other. It would have been either death or a lifetime together.

Maddy and I remained friends—how could we not? She had been my late-night companion since she first climbed out of her second-story window so we could go catch fireflies together. As children, we would walk our bikes silently down the gravel drive

and meet for midnight escapes on the beach, where we made fires out of driftwood and listened to the waves lap the sand while we shared our most intimate thoughts and dreams.

We had to be careful, though. My parents were often away, and I would be left alone in the care of Genevieve and Robert, the childless Swiss couple who took care of the place. Genevieve was short and stocky and cooked. Robert drove and looked after the garden. Both of them were in bed by ten and assumed I was too. I was an only child, pudgy and bookish, so they hardly would have imagined I had this secret, nocturnal existence. Madeleine's father was more of a problem. He would have beaten her if they had caught her sneaking out. Not that it would have stopped her.

One time we were playing tennis and I saw the welts at the tops of her thighs when she bent over to pick up a ball. He had used a belt. I wanted to do something but she swore it was nothing and let's play another set. God, she was brave. She still is.

The dinner is marvelous. Fresh swordfish, tomatoes and corn, hot bread, and ice cream, washed down with cold, steely white wine. Maddy has a special way of grilling the fish using pine branches that gives it a wonderfully rich taste. We sit under round paper lanterns, outside on a small, screened-in porch off the kitchen. There are more men than women so I sit between Clive and Cissy. Cissy is very funny. Small, blond, she can talk for hours. She is from outside Philadelphia, the Main Line. She and Ned have been trying unsuccessfully for years to have a baby. I admire her toughness, her lack of self-pity.

Clive keeps trying to quiz me about my clients, but I put him off. When I grow tired of his insistence, I ignore him completely and listen to Harry tell one of his stories, which, if I recall, was about the time when he was seventeen and drove his car into a tree on purpose to collect the insurance money. He had even borrowed a pair of hockey goalie pads for protection. The car was an old heap, and he had hoped to make about five hundred dollars. He thought thirty miles an hour would be a good speed, not too fast or too slow, but the impact was so great, it knocked him out.

“The next thing I know,” Harry says, “there’s a cop knocking on my window with his nightstick wondering just what the hell is going on and why am I wearing hockey pads in the middle of July?”

We hoot with laughter. Claire, on Harry’s right, is in paroxysms of delight. She had been helping Maddy in the kitchen and is the first to jump to her feet to help clear. She is showing off a little, letting us know she is more than just Clive’s latest mistress. We are all of us in our forties, and we can’t help but be a little enchanted by her potent combination of youth, beauty, passion, and brains. It turns out she does the *New York Times* crossword puzzle, which is one of Harry’s favorite distractions too. They groan complicitly about the creeping influence of pop culture in the clues. They argue over a book review they both recently read, and share a passion for Mark Twain. Is this the best night of her life? I think so.

Clive is not part of this. He dislikes not being the star. This crowd is not impressed by his Aston Martin or his fancy watch or the last time he was in St. Bart's. He doesn't really belong here. Claire doesn't belong with him either. I am willing him to leave.

After dinner we play charades, something else at which Harry excels. By midnight everyone is drunk and Harry stands up and says, "It's time." I know what he means, of course. As do Ned and Cissy. Maddy just rolls her eyes.

"Time for what?" asks Claire, but already the others are in motion.

"Time to go to the beach," Cissy says over her shoulder. "We do it after every dinner party."

"You all go on without me," declares Maddy, remaining in her chair. "Someone has to stay here with Johnny." I could have offered to stay. I normally do. But not tonight.

"Come on," says Claire, pulling a bewildered Clive to his feet and dashing out the door to the Winslows' old red Jeep. In the front seat, next to Harry, Ned is carrying a bottle of wine. He is slurring his words a little. Cissy is sitting on his lap. Claire and Clive pile in beside me in the backseat. The house is a short drive to the beach, under five minutes. This time of night the beach is deserted. The moon lights a path across the water for us. The sand is cool beneath our feet.

Harry runs down to the water's edge, pulling off his shirt and then dropping his trousers until, naked, he rushes whooping into the dark water. Ned and Cissy follow close behind, Cissy

shrieking as she dives in. I am slower, but suddenly beside me, Claire is undressed as well. I can't help but notice her body in the moon glow, her young breasts, the roundness of her hips. I catch a glimpse of a triangle of dark pubic hair. It happens in an instant, of course. One second she is standing beside me, the next she is in the water. A surge of desire seizes me as I watch her run. It is just Clive and I now. I pull off my trousers. "Bloody hell," he mutters and strips too. We dive in together.

At night the ocean always seems so much calmer. It is like a big lake, the waves barely more than ripples. The water is waist-high. Most women would be crouching in the water, concealing themselves. But not Claire. It is becoming apparent to me that she is not most women. Harry and Ned are having a splash fight, like a couple of boys. She joins in, laughing, splashing hard. It is impossible not to watch her. Clive stands off to the side, as though he were an interloper and not Claire's lover. Then Cissy climbs on Ned's shoulders and gracefully dives off. "I want to try that," says Claire. But instead of climbing on Ned, or even Clive, she glides behind Harry and grabs his hands. He squats obediently under the water while she places her feet on each shoulder. He lifts her easily, and she balances for a moment, drops his hands, and throws her arms out and her head back before smoothly diving off. When she comes up, she wipes the wet hair from her face and yells, "I want to do that again!"

Once again Harry squats, his back to her, and she confidently mounts. And again, she drops his hands and balances, but this

time she wavers and falls with a splash into the water. Harry helps her up. “Careful,” he says with a laugh.

“My favorite lifeguard,” she pronounces with a laugh and gives him a wet kiss on the cheek and a quick hug, her nipples grazing his chest. “Once again you’ve saved me from drowning.” She stands back in front of him, as if to say, Look at me. This could be yours. I can’t remember if anyone else noticed the moment. I tried to catch Ned’s or Cissy’s eye, but they were in the middle of doing another dive.

Harry says nothing and looks away as Clive comes up.

“Let me show you how it’s done, mate,” he says.

Claire pulls away from him, but he squats down, saying, “Come on.”

She climbs up without looking at him and just dives off, straight and clean. When she comes up, she says, “Can we go? I’m getting cold.”

The moment has passed. Claire wades back out of the water, shoulders hunched forward, an arm covering her breasts, a hand in front of her loins. She looks at nobody. No one looks at anyone as we hurriedly pull our clothes over our wet bodies. Our mood is postlapsarian.

We drive back to the house in silence. Even Cissy is quiet. When we get out, Claire and Clive hang back. It is obvious they are going to have a fight. The rest of us go inside.

That’s not entirely true. I linger just out of sight and overhear snatches of what they say. “Don’t touch me” and “Stupid cunt”

and “Why don’t you just fuck him then?”

She comes in, crying, running past me to the kitchen. To Maddy.

“Is everything all right?” asks Harry. I say nothing, and Clive is standing in the hallway, looking angry. He wants to follow her but knows he can’t, an unbeliever in the temple.

Madeleine comes out. “Clive, Claire seems very upset. I know it’s late, and we’ve all had a lot to drink. But she asked if she could stay here tonight, and I told her she could.”

Clive stares at her, unsure of what to say, of how to react. The words he wants to say fail in his throat. His will is not as strong as Maddy’s.

She senses his frustration and puts a hand on his arm. “She’ll call you in the morning.”

When he gets outside the house, he will find his words again, he will rage, he will think black thoughts, call them all names. But not now. Standing before him is Madeleine, looking like a Madonna. Behind her, Harry, Ned, me. He has no chance. Now all he says is “Tell that cunt I don’t want to see her again,” and he leaves, his car spitting gravel as it drives off.

Inside, Maddy has her arm around Claire, who is apologizing over and over. Her face is wet with tears. Maddy consoles her. We all do. Or at least try to.

“See, I told you I didn’t like him,” I say, but all the thanks I get is a dirty look from Madeleine.

“Don’t you worry about it,” Harry tells Claire. “You’re

welcome to stay here as long as you like. If you need us to get your things from Clive's, I'll run over tomorrow. For tonight, we can loan you anything you need."

"Thank you," she sniffs.

"We are going to have to put you on the couch in the living room, if that's all right. Ned and Cissy already have the guest room. We'll get you pillows and sheets. You'll be snug as a bug."

I am about to suggest that she would be welcome to stay at my house, as there are plenty of empty bedrooms, but then think better of it.

"Please don't go to any bother. I don't mind at all. You're being so kind. I just feel like such a fool."

"Not at all," says Harry. "I'll be right back." He goes upstairs and returns several minutes later with pillow, sheets, blankets, a towel, and a large gray T-shirt with the words YALE HOCKEY on it. "I figured you could use something to sleep in."

Cissy and Madeleine begin to make up the couch. Harry wanders into the kitchen and starts rinsing glasses. I debate having a last drink but then decide against it. It's already past one in the morning. Instead I say my good-byes, kiss Maddy good night, tell Claire to sleep well and that everything will look better in the morning, and head out to the familiar path that leads through the narrow strip of trees that separates our two houses.

I can imagine Claire, having calmed down, thanks to a few gulps of brandy, getting under the covers on the couch. Madeleine would be there, making sure her newest charge is

comfortable and well looked after. Ned, Cissy, and Harry would have already gone up. Then Maddy would have left too, turning off lights, leaving Claire alone in her temporary bed, staring up at the ceiling, happy as a child.

3

SEVERAL WEEKS PASS. SUMMER RAGES ON. THE STREETS OF Manhattan bake in the fierce sunlight. To Claire, the breezes and salt water of Long Island are just a memory. She has been banished to the ordinary world, one inhabited by coworkers, college friends, deliverymen, strangers on the subway. Like Eurydice, she will never again walk in fields of flowers.

Claire has not seen the Winslows. There is no reason why she should. She returned to the city the day after her fight with Clive. Harry and Ned had gone to Clive's to get her bag and retrieve her rental car, but when they pulled up, no one was home and her possessions had been thrown into the front seat.

Even though Harry and Madeleine had asked her to stay and been so kind, she felt like an intruder, a stranger taken in under false pretenses. She would forget about them. Their lives, which had temporarily intersected with hers, would now continue along a different path.

I thought about her on a few occasions during the days that followed. Hers was an unfinished story, and I wanted to know more of it. What would she do? What turns would her life take? And then it seemed she had disappeared for good.

Until one night Harry announces to Maddy and me over dinner in the kitchen, "I meant to tell you. Guess who I saw today?"

He had been in New York, lunch with his agent, a few errands.
“Claire.”

“How is she?” asks Maddy.

“She looked well. I was walking out of the restaurant and talking with Reuben, and all of a sudden, I almost knocked her down. What are the odds of that?”

“I liked her,” I say. “Poor thing was wasted on Clive. What a horse’s ass.”

“Maddy liked her too, didn’t you, sweetheart? At least I thought you did. We were standing there chatting about this and that, and she asked warmly after you both, and Johnny, and Ned and Cissy, and she looked a little blue, so I thought, what the hell, and invited her out for the weekend. At first, she said she couldn’t, but I insisted. Hope you don’t mind. She needs being taken in hand. Maddy, you’re just the person to do it, too.”

Maddy does love a project. Even as a child she was always taking in strays. I remember sitting up nights with her, helping her watch over a dying rabbit or chipmunk which the local cat (my cat, incidentally, but she never blamed me for it) had eviscerated. She would keep them warm, use an eyedropper to give them water, and inevitably bury them in the woods in one of my mother’s shoe boxes.

“I’m glad you invited her, darling,” she says. “But we can’t have her sleep on the couch again. Where will she sleep? Aren’t Ned and Cissy coming?”

“Don’t worry about that,” I offer. “They can stay with me. I

have lots of room.”

“Great,” says Harry. “Thanks, Walter. And Ned and Cissy can give her a ride out.”

ON FRIDAY THEY ARRIVE, LATE. THE TRAFFIC IS PARTICULARLY hellish on Fridays, especially during the summer. What had been a ninety-or-so-minute drive in my childhood can now stretch out to three hours or more, even for people like me who know the back roads. The farms that used to line the roads are almost all gone. The old potato barns are nightclubs. The quaint little stores where I had once bought comic books and penny candy and donuts are high-end boutiques selling cashmere sweaters and virgin olive oil. Last year an Hermès opened in the old liquor store. The beach and the sunsets are just about the only things that haven’t changed.

Claire is greeted with hugs and kisses. Her face is bright with welcome. She looks lovely. “I brought this for you,” she says as she presents Madeleine with a large, brightly wrapped box.

“It’s heavy,” Madeleine says. “What is it?”

She opens the box and pulls out a gleaming copper saucepan. “Oh, you shouldn’t have. These are very expensive.” It must have been a small fortune to someone like Claire. She works for a magazine, an assistant editor or something, the lowest on the pole. The generosity of the gift, as well as its appropriateness, overwhelms Madeleine, who is a sucker for cookware. She gives Claire another, longer hug. “I love it. Thank you!”

“And this is for you,” Claire says to Harry. She hands him a

paper bag. From inside he withdraws a red T-shirt and opens it up to display lettering on the front: LIFEGUARD and a white cross. He puts it on over his shirt. Everyone laughs and claps.

“Another childhood dream fulfilled,” he laughs. “All I need now is a whistle and a clipboard.”

Wine is brought, glasses filled. Harry carves the chicken. It is from a local farm. There is also fresh sweet corn and long green beans crunchy with sea salt. Everyone is happy to be here. Plans are discussed for Saturday. A beach excursion and a picnic seem to be in order. Then Harry announces that tomorrow night they are getting a sitter and giving Madeleine a night off from cooking—“About time!” she cries and we all laugh—and that we will all be going out to eat.

It’s one of our favorite restaurants, a place with red-checked tablecloths and inch-thick steaks dripping with butter. The owners are a diminutive Greek woman and her brother, who spends most evenings drinking by himself in the corner. Some nights I sit with him and listen to his schemes for investing in real estate. Once when I was there, a family of local Indians from the Shinnecock tribe came in. There were six of them, two parents and four children. They ordered a single steak and split it amongst them. It made me feel absurd and fat to be eating the same thing only for myself.

“It’s also got the worst wine list in the world, but that’s part of its charm,” says Harry.

Tonight, though, we are all tired. There will be no midnight

swim. Madeleine says she will clean, and Claire offers to help her. Harry excuses himself and goes upstairs to work. I lead Ned and Cissy back through the bushes to my house. It is late when the two women go to bed. I can imagine them in the living room talking, their feet tucked up behind them on the couch, finishing the wine. They are very different, but there is a growing bond between them. It is hard to resist being idolized.

So much has been made about Harry, yet Madeleine has never protested or voiced any resentment. She has given of herself utterly. Since their marriage I had never thought of Madeleine needing or wanting anything other than Harry because she had so much already. He was the missing piece that made her complete. But she is human, too, something that many of us forget at times because she seems immune to pettiness, possessing a serenity that actually grows more pronounced the greater her troubles. She knew she had Harry and Johnny—and me, of course—but can she be blamed for wanting more? What is important is she thought she was the one making the choice.

As I often do, I sit in my room looking across to her house. In the distance I hear the whistle of the night train heading back to New York. Maddy's light goes out well past midnight, and I crawl into my childhood bed.

4

THE NEXT MORNING CLAIRE COMES DOWN LATER THAN THE rest of us. It is nearly eleven. We are outside in the sunlight. Harry has been up for hours. He says it's the time when he works best. We have all settled into our normal weekend routines. Newspapers. The smells of coffee and bacon. The hum of crickets, the call of birds. Harry and Johnny are practicing their fly casting on the lawn. They flick and roll the long line out gracefully, allowing the bare tip to hover for a second before floating down to the grass. They have been doing this for nearly forty-five minutes. It is mesmerizing, like watching water eddy and pool in a stream. It is a skill I have never been able to master. Johnny already casts like an old pro. Last year Harry took him to Wyoming for a week along the Bighorn. Harry once told me that if he hadn't become a writer, he would have been a fishing guide.

Claire emerges from the house, carrying a mug. Her eyes are slightly puffy. She is wearing Harry's Yale hockey T-shirt. It reaches down to just below the tops of her thighs. Her feet are bare.

"So that's where it is," he says. "Been looking for that."

"Sorry. I took it by mistake. I brought it out last night to give back. Hope you don't mind. It's just so comfortable."

"Not at all. Consider it a gift. I can always get another. After all, you did give me a new T-shirt last night."

“Thank you.”

I can't help but stare at her. I can see the curve of her breasts under the shirt, their youthful lift, the barely visible outlines of her nipples. Maybe she senses my eyes on her and excuses herself to go back inside. I have already seen her naked in the dark, but somehow in the morning it's different. Of course, she has seen me naked too, but it's not quite the same thing. I no longer possess the allure of youth, if I ever did.

ON A SUMMER DAY, FOR US THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY TO GO for a day at the beach—by canoe. My house and Madeleine's former house sit side by side overlooking a brackish lagoon that drains into the ocean. As children we disdained the notion of being driven to the beach, or even biking. We would pack up a battered Old Town canoe with towels, coolers, beach chairs, and whatever else we needed and set off like Lewis and Clark. It is nearly half a mile to paddle, and the winds could be stiff, sometimes forcing us to hug the shore, but the extra effort was always worth it. Unlike those people who came by car and sat crowded in clumps by the parking lot, we had a whole stretch of beach almost entirely to ourselves.

There are two canoes now, and we keep them on racks at my house, the paddles and mildewed life jackets, which only Johnny ever wears, hanging from the thwarts. Harry and I hoist one canoe and walk it past the bulrushes onto the old dock and into the water, our feet sinking in the mire. Ned easily picks up the other one by himself. The wicker on the seats has long since given

out and been replaced with crude and less comfortable wooden boards. Spiders dash out from the gunnels, and we scoop them out with our hands. Standing calf-deep in the water, we load up the canoes and take our seats. From long custom, I sit in the stern and Maddy in the bow of one, Harry and Ned in the other. Johnny sits in front of his father while Cissy reclines in the middle on a folding beach chair like Cleopatra touring the Nile. Claire hops into ours and sits on a cooler.

“I feel like a freeloader,” she says. “Would it be all right if I got out and pushed?”

“Nonsense,” I say. “Enjoy the ride.”

“Only if one of you lets me paddle back,” she says.

The other canoe is far in front of us. The trip to the beach is always a race. Johnny’s and Cissy’s extra weight, along with most of the gear, usually evens things out, but now with Claire we are losing ground. Madeleine is intensely focused, reaching her paddle far out to draw as much water as possible, sending miniature whirlpools by me. She is very strong. I paddle hard too, focusing more on speed than on steering. “Oh, it’s all my fault,” says Claire, seeing how badly we are trailing. She has grasped the urgency of the moment yet can do nothing. “That’s it,” she says, and takes off her shirt. Gracefully, she dives into the water and we shoot forward. “I wasn’t kidding about pushing,” she says, and we feel her kicking behind the canoe.

Madeleine yells, “We’re gaining.”

It’s true. We are. My arms are tiring, but I keep up the same

pace as before. I won't let her down. Madeleine is the most competitive person I know.

"Get a horse," I yell to the other canoe as we pull within several lengths.

"Hey, that's cheating," cries Harry. "No motors allowed."

"Faster, Daddy, faster!"

I feel Claire stop pushing and see the other canoe now veering off to the right. Claire has reappeared by the other canoe. She has grabbed the stern and is forcing it off course.

"No fair," Harry shouts, as he begins to stand up.

Cissy shrieks, "Don't even think about it, Harry!"

Laughing, he tries to grab for Claire, but she ducks under the water. Seconds later her head pops up on the other side, like a seal's. The canoe rocks dangerously but doesn't tip over. Ned is sitting in the bow with his paddle poised in the air, looking bemused.

"I want a do-over," he says.

Madeleine keeps paddling hard as we pass them. My arms feel like they are going to fall off, and my back is on fire, but we keep going until we hit the shallows. There is no way we can lose now. I lean back, exhausted, as we glide to a stop, the nose of the canoe crunching into the sand. Maddy gets out and dances triumphantly in the water. Claire splashes up, and the two hug like tournament champions.

"In your face, Winslow!" crows Maddy.

I am too tired to move.

“Flagrant violation. We are lodging an official protest to the stewards of the yacht club,” jokes Harry, as they glide lazily to the beach. “We’ll see you barred from these waters for good, Mrs. Winslow.”

“You’re just a sore loser.”

“Me? We had you beat fair and square until you torpedoed us.”

“All’s fair in love and canoeing, darling.” She kisses him.

“You’re coming with us on the way back,” he says loudly to Claire, and everyone laughs.

I know most people find the beach restful and restorative, but some beaches have special healing powers. For me, this is that beach. It is a place I have explored since childhood, and I feel as comfortable here as I would in my own house. I tolerate the occasional intruder the way any host would but am always secretly glad to have the place to myself again. Put me down on a stretch of sand in the Caribbean or Maine, and I will certainly appreciate it, but it’s not quite the same thing. In some places the water’s too cold, or too warm, or too green. The shells are alien to me, the smells unfamiliar. But here it is perfect, and I will come here as happily in January as in August. There are few days I look forward to more than that first warm day when I feel brave and resolved enough to withstand the still-frigid temperatures and the only other creatures in the water are neoprene-clad surfers and the fish, and I dive into numbing, cleansing cold.

My father did this every year too. He and I would drive to the

beach in the old station wagon and plunge in. No one else was on the beach at that time of year, and he would say, "It's polar bear time, Walt." Now, I partly do it for him, and if I had a son, I would do it with him too.

By midsummer the water warms up, and the bathing becomes easier, although it rarely gets above seventy degrees. I am by no means a sun worshiper, though, one of those people who lie immobile for hours courting melanoma. For me the beach is about movement, about swimming or walking or playing, some food, and then a chance to doze in the sun and recharge before beginning the paddle back.

Maddy spreads out the blankets on the sand while Harry and I plant the umbrellas. We are fanatical about making sure the pole is deep enough. A sudden gust could pick up a poorly entrenched umbrella and send it skittering across the beach like a headless chicken. The sure sign of a beach rookie. We dig deep, packing the base with wet sand, tamping it down. Then there is football. Johnny, Claire, and Harry on one team. Ned, Cissy, and me the other. Claire is surprisingly good. She catches several of Harry's passes and runs by me twice, making me feel old and fat. When her team wins, Claire jumps up and down, grinning with delight. This is her day; she is making an impact on all our lives.

We are all hot and sweaty. Harry proposes a swim. "Let's make it a race." We are used to his races.

Cissy groans and tells Harry he's too energetic.

"I'll race," says Claire.

“Fantastic.” Harry beams. “What about you, darling?”

We all know the answer. Maddy says nothing but smiles and removes her old green cotton pareo, the one she bought years ago in Spain. She might be over forty, but she still has the same figure she did when she was in her twenties. A long, lithe torso, surprisingly large breasts, strong shoulders, a flat stomach, small backside, and slender, slightly bowed legs. It is a body that an adolescent boy would have dreamt up.

“You have an amazing figure,” comments Claire as she watches Maddy stretch. “What’s your secret?”

“Are you kidding? I’m fat.” She has always said that. She hates compliments about her looks. She is not fat.

“See that white buoy?” says Harry to Claire. “Out around it and back, okay?”

The three swimmers dive into the water and strike out through the surf. Claire is swimming hard, but Harry and Madeleine swiftly outdistance her. Madeleine knifes through the water with long, powerful strokes. Her speed is incredible. She is well around the buoy by the time Harry reaches it. Claire is far behind them both. Maddy strides easily out of the water first, barely winded. She turns and waits for Harry. He follows closely, panting hard. Ned, Cissy, Johnny, and I all whistle and clap.

“You’re too good,” he says. “One day I’ll beat you.”

“Maybe for your birthday, darling,” she answers with a smile. It is part of their old routine. It is like the Greek myth where the outcome is always the same. I think if by some fluke Harry

were to almost win he would hold back. A world in which Maddy doesn't always win their swim races is a world neither of them wants to live in. I am not sure I would either.

Claire staggers out of the surf. She looks exhausted and surprised that she lost.

“Cheer up, Claire,” Harry says with a laugh, clapping her on the back. “I guess I should have mentioned that Maddy was an Olympic-level swimmer in school. She won the Maryland regionals in high school and was an alternate for the U.S. team. I've never even come close to beating her.”

It's true. Maddy is an extraordinary athlete. You should see her swing a golf club.

Hands on hips, bending slightly at her slender waist, Claire is still breathing hard. She takes in this information without saying anything, but I watch her watching Maddy. She is still a little incredulous. With the arrogance of youth, it is hard for her to believe someone a decade or so older could beat her so easily, especially when she had thought she was going to win. She is seeing in Madeleine something she hadn't seen before. I know the feeling.

She walks up to Maddy, who is drying her hair, saying, “That was incredible. I had no idea you were such a great swimmer. Why'd you give it up?”

Maddy turns, the sun illuminating her. She is like a being from a more advanced species. “I didn't give it up. I just found other things that were more important.”

I can tell Claire is puzzled by this response. I watch her face. Talent for her is not something to be taken for granted. “If I was as good as you are, I would have kept at it.”

Maddy smiles. “Come on and give me a hand with lunch,” she says.

They kneel down at the coolers. There are bottles of beer wet with ice, cold chicken legs from last night, egg salad sandwiches, homemade potato chips. Peanut butter and jelly for Johnny. We huddle on the blankets, munching happily. Sitting on a low, old-fashioned beach chair, I am wearing my beat-up straw hat with the slightly ripped brim to keep the sun off my increasing baldness.

Claire leans in to me and whispers, “What happened to Johnny?”

Johnny has his shirt off. There is a long white scar down the center of his tanned chest.

“Heart,” I whisper back. “He had several operations when he was very young.”

“Is he all right now?”

I nod yes. It is something I prefer not to think about too much.

She goes over and sits with him. They begin playing in the sand. Building a castle. The adults are discussing politics. Harry and Ned are, as usual, on opposite ends of the spectrum. Maddy is reading, ignoring them, also as usual. Cissy is lying on her front, the straps of her bikini top unclasped. I think about reading too but feel my eyelids beginning to lower. In the distance, I

see Johnny and Claire strolling alone together down the beach
collecting shells before I nod off.

5

THE RESTAURANT IS IN AN OLD FARMHOUSE SET BACK FROM the highway. Local legend has it that in a former incarnation it had been a speakeasy. Across the road sits one of the area's last remaining farms, the fields of young corn hushed in the twilight. The hostess, Anna, is barely five-foot, with close-cut red hair and a beaklike nose. She has never married. Her mother, who died a few years ago, was very fat, and she would sit each night on a chair in the sweltering kitchen waiting for the last customer to leave. When Anna sees us, she gives Maddy, Harry, and me a hug, a sign of favor that we know has as much to do with Harry being a respected author as it does with us having been loyal patrons for years. One wall behind the bar is covered with faded framed and autographed book jackets from regular patrons. Vonnegut, Plimpton, Jones, Winslow.

"You're late," she reproves us. We had waited at home to watch the sunset and are already a little drunk. Harry had mixed martinis. "I almost gave up your table. We are very busy tonight."

Waiting customers crowd into the small bar, where Kosta pours drinks. We wave to him and follow Anna to our table. The decor hasn't changed since I first started eating here in the 1970s with my parents and probably not since it opened in the 1950s. The walls are brown with age. "You wanted to sit inside, right?"

There is an outside dining porch during the summer, but it is

too brightly lit for our tastes. It's where the millionaires sit. The interior room is cozier, the tables and chairs wooden and solid, not the cheap plastic found outside, the red-and-white checkered tablecloths patched and worn. An enormous old cast-iron stove sits unused in the corner. We order more martinis from one of the Vietnamese girls who work there. There is a family of them. They all live in a trailer behind the restaurant.

"Wait till you try this meat," Harry tells Claire, leaning across the table. "It's the best steak in the world."

She looks at the prices and whispers to me, "Walter, it's very expensive."

It is expensive. This is not the kind of place where she would normally come if a man wasn't paying. I can see her doing the math in her head. I remember what it is like to go out with a large group with expensive tastes when you only have a few dollars in the bank.

Once in college I joined some classmates at a restaurant on the Upper East Side, students down for the weekend on a spree. My first credit card sat chastely in my wallet. When my father had given it to me, he said, "Now, Walt, this is for use only in emergencies." I had about fifty dollars in cash too, a fortune back then. One of our group, the son of a wine importer who had been raised glamorously in both Connecticut and England, casually informed us that he was having the caviar. Several others, equally privileged, did as well. I gulped when I saw the prices. He then ordered wine, champagnes and Bordeaux.

This was not the way I normally lived. Part of me was greedy for the experience, the other part appalled by the extravagance. And, mind you, we weren't poor. But a closely controlled lifetime of allowances, boarding schools, country clubs, and college had kept me sheltered from this kind of decadence. Scrupulously, I ordered the cheapest thing on the menu. Chicken of some kind. It didn't matter, of course. When the bill came we all divided it up equally. I was horrified to see that my share was nearly one hundred dollars. I had never spent anywhere close to that on a meal in my life. If my companions were equally aghast, they hid it. As I found out, that was the code. Gentlemen don't quibble about the check. As I reluctantly handed over the card, I felt a tremendous fool, especially at the thought of those who had gorged themselves at my expense.

When I told my father what had happened, he assured me he would pay the bill. This time. "I hope you learned a lesson," he said. "Next time I won't bail you out."

I turn to Claire and whisper, "Don't worry. This is our treat. You're our guest."

She doesn't say anything, thanking me instead with her eyes. They are truly lovely.

We order. Our drinks come. Then hot plates of saganaki, which is basically melted Greek cheese. Incredibly delicious. Taramasalata, bread, and olives. Wine. We are all laughing a lot, and Harry is standing up and telling a funny story in some kind of accent and doing a little dance, which has us all roaring.

Finally the steaks arrive. Large hunks of seared beef, thick, charred crusts of salt, pepper, and sparkling fat dripping down the sides. We fall on them like sled dogs.

“Oh my god, this is the most delicious thing I’ve ever eaten,” gasps Claire.

The rest of us grunt appreciatively, too happy to stop chewing. In midbite, I sense Claire tense. I look at her, thinking she might be about to choke. But it is not that. She sees something. I look around, following her gaze.

“What’s the idea, Winslow?”

It’s Clive. He’s standing over the table. Staring hard. He looks flushed.

“Clive,” says Claire. “What are you ...?”

“Quiet. I’m not talking to you.”

Harry puts down his knife and fork. The rest of us sit expectantly. Ned pushes his chair back. The muscles bunch in his neck. Harry says, “Clive, I’ll ask you not to speak to Claire like that.”

“I’ll speak to her any bloody way I like. So,” he says, now turning to Claire, “have you fucked him yet?” Turning to Harry, he continues, “She’s a pretty good fuck, isn’t she, ’Arry?”

I notice him dropping his *h*’s, revealing his true origins. Yes, I know, I am a snob. But is that worse than pretending you are something you are not?

“Get out of here, Clive. You’re drunk.”

“So what if I am?” To Maddy he sneers, “You better watch

her, or she'll be shagging 'Arry the moment your back's turned."

"All right. That does it." Harry is on his feet, moving toward Clive.

For a minute I think he is going to hit him. Clive seems to think so too because he involuntarily flinches, awaiting a blow that never comes. And Harry is a powerful man, maybe not as strong as Ned but big enough. You don't play hockey the way Harry did and not be good with your fists. Instead he grabs Clive fiercely by the lapels.

"Clive, I don't know what you're talking about, but obviously you've had too much to drink," he says. "I want you to apologize to my wife, Claire, and Cissy. Then I want you to pay your check and get out of here."

Clive looks nervous but responds, "What if I don't?"

"Then I'll take you outside and beat the hell out of you."

By this time Anna is at our table, and diners sitting around us are staring. "What's going on? Mister Harry, what are you doing?"

Harry releases Clive. "Nothing, Anna. One of your guests was just leaving."

"Fuck off, 'Arry," says Clive, regaining his composure as he retreats from the room. To Claire: "And fuck you too, you slag."

Ned is about to go after him, but Harry puts his hand on his shoulder. "Let him go. It's not worth it." To Anna, he says, "My apologies, Anna. Hope that didn't spoil any of your other guests' appetites."

“I don’t like that kind of thing here, Mister Harry,” she says. “I don’t want him coming back here. You can always come back. You’re almost like family, you, Mrs. Winslow, and Mister Walter.”

“Thank you, Anna.” Then he turns to Claire and puts his hands on her shoulders and asks, “Are you all right?”

She nods, her eyes red. “I’m sorry,” she chokes. “I’m sorry.”

“Some men just don’t like being dumped, eh?” someone jokes to break the tension. I think it is me.

“Harry,” says Maddy, rising regally to her feet. “I’m going to take Claire into the ladies’ room. Come on, Claire. Cissy, you come too.”

After they return, Claire is quiet. She doesn’t look at anyone. Maddy leans into Harry. “We should go.”

“Of course. I’ll go see Anna about the bill.”

The ride home is suffused with awkward silence. Ned and Cissy are in their own car, the rest of us in the old Jeep. Harry tries to make light of what happened. For once his natural charm is ineffectual. It is impossible to tell what Maddy is thinking. She is keeping her thoughts to herself. What will the two of them talk about later in bed, in the privacy of their own room? Will Maddy be angry? Will she be frightened? And what will Harry do or say? Would they say anything? I have no idea. This is unexplored territory. They have been married for nearly twenty years, and are so inseparable she even went with him on his book tours.

It is Madeleine who saves the moment. She turns in her seat,

looks at Claire, who is sitting in the back next to me, and says, “I hope you know I think what Clive said is complete shit.”

Claire sniffs gratefully. “Thank you, Maddy.”

“No. You don’t have to thank me. It just sickens me that someone like him feels he can go about poisoning people’s minds just because he isn’t happy. He’s a stupid man, and he was trying to hurt you and us. We offended his vanity, and he had to lash out.”

I have almost never been more proud of her. She has always had the ability to cut through the extraneous and focus on the essential.

Harry is driving, concentrating on the road. Briefly, he looks at Maddy and smiles, and she smiles back. Unpleasantness has been forgotten; order, trust have been restored. Harry asks, “Did you see his face when he thought I was going to hit him?”

Maddy laughs. “I know! I thought he was going to start crying. Why didn’t you hit him, anyway? God knows he deserved it.”

“It’s not the way it used to be, darling. For all I know, he could have come to dinner with a table of lawyers hoping I’d do just that. You can’t hit anyone anymore without getting sued. Happened to a friend of mine a few years back. Got taken to the cleaners. Lawyers take the fun out of everything. Sorry, Walter, no offense meant.”

“None taken,” I answer.

Maddy turns back to Claire. “Would he have done that? Is he like that? God, how awful.”

Claire, shocked into response, answers, “I really don’t know. At first he was so nice. It was only once we came out here that I saw a different side of him. In New York, he was charming and handsome and successful ...”

“Quite a catch,” comments Maddy.

“Yes. No. I suppose. But out here he seemed so different, so, I don’t know, he just wasn’t ...”

“Wasn’t what?” asks Harry.

“He wasn’t ...” She starts but catches herself, and she says instead, “He wasn’t genuine. Yes, that’s it. He just seemed like a phony. Do you know what I mean? All of a sudden, here, in this beautiful place, next to all of you, he just seemed so fake. The way a paste diamond looks when it’s held to a real one in the right light.”

We pull into their drive. A few lights are on. The sitter’s awake. Ned and Cissy have evidently driven straight to my house. I say my good-nights and follow them over, picking my way like a blind monk through a familiar maze.

6

LABOR DAY. THE SUMMER'S LAST HURRAH. ALREADY NIGHT is falling earlier. Autumn is waiting on the doorstep. People bring sweaters when they go out in the evening.

Claire is driving with me. She has been out every weekend. She is now one of the gang, part of a nucleus that never changes even when minor characters drift in and out at restaurants, cocktail parties, lazy afternoons at the Winslows' or at the beach, nights playing charades, sailing in my little sailboat, Johnny's ninth birthday, skinny-dipping in the ocean, or sitting under the stars listening to Verdi. We are all tan.

I insisted on leaving Thursday night, telling her to call in sick to work. No one will be around anyway, I said. Everyone goes away. We leave in the early evening. We will have dinner and a chat. This is my chance to get to know her better. She will be staying at my house this weekend. As will Ned and Cissy. They arrive tomorrow. The Winslows have other houseguests this weekend.

I order martinis for both of us. She has adopted them now too. Never more than two, I told her once. I repeat an old joke about why martinis are like women's breasts; one is not enough and three are too many. Words to live by.

We are in an Italian restaurant in town. It has been here since 1947. The booths are covered in red Naugahyde, the menu

features a drawing of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. It is the last remaining business on Newtown Lane from my childhood. Even the hardware store has been replaced. There are two things I appreciate about it. One is that it is devoutly democratic. I have seen movie stars eating at tables beside weather-necked fishermen and their families. The other is that they make delicious thin-crust pizza.

I am deposing her. Where she was born, where she lived, where she went to college, what she studied, why she does what she does, who she is. My right hand itches for a yellow legal pad to scratch it all down, but I will remember it well enough.

She is a willing witness, her tongue loosened by gin. And I am on my best behavior, not aggressive, but solicitous, empathetic. She tells me about her father, her French mother, her younger brother, who lives in California, where he works for a software company. But I also know witnesses have their own motivations. They will lie, or twist facts, if they have to. They can be resentful or closed, releasing only the most meager information. Others want me to like them, thinking that will color my interpretation of the law.

And it is clear that Claire wants me to like her. Not romantically, alas. No, she is too easy around me for that. Instead, she treats me the way one would treat a prospective employer. She wants me to see her in the best light, to gain my approval. And she is hard to resist. She laughs at my jokes, she asks me questions, gets me to tell stories. There is nothing a man likes

half as much as the sound of his own voice and an appreciative, preferably female, audience.

The conversation steers to Harry and Madeleine. “Tell me more about them,” she says. “I know you’ve known Maddy your whole life. I have never met anyone like them. Are they really as happy as they seem?”

We have almost finished the wine now. Crusts and a few lonely olive slices are all that remain on the platter.

I shrug. “Who’s to say? I mean, happiness is a chimera. The real question is, does the happiness outweigh the bad, because every relationship has both. I guess it’s a question of having more of one than the other. And in the case of Maddy and Harry, I would have to say that, yes, there is more happiness. I know them pretty well, and I have to admit I have never known a couple so well-suited for each other. They know how to work together and have fun together.”

I don’t blame her for being curious. Some couples have that effect. They have a golden aura about them, something almost palpable that makes them shine more than the rest of us. It is as if they walk through their lives with a spotlight trained on them. When they enter a room, you can’t help noticing them.

She gets me talking. In a way, it is a relief to share little secrets. I have seen so much and know so much about them. This must be how a servant feels, whispering over the kitchen table, intimate but still apart.

“Does he love her very much?”

It is a question I have never asked, had never thought to ask. The answer, to me, is blindingly obvious. Who would not love Madeleine?

“Of course,” I answer. “Theirs is one of the great love stories of our age.”

It sounds flip, but I mean it. Not in a tragic, fatal way, where love is denied or thwarted, as one might read in a romance novel. They are not Tristan and Isolde, or Abelard and Héloïse. I can think of no heroes of literature who would fit their paradigm. Their story lacks the obstacles to passion. They met and fell in love. It is one of the simplest and, at the same time, most difficult things to do. The drama of their lives is that they know how to keep love alive. And they are not selfish about their love. They share it with so many people. It is what draws the rest of us to them. It's not that he is a respected author or she a great beauty, or even that they occupy a charming cottage near the beach, or any of their many other attributes. It is the strength of their bond that draws us and inspires us. We look at them and want to be them. I say as much to Claire. I am probably a little drunk and slightly embarrassed by my loquacity.

Later, on the ride back to my house, I make a pass at her.

“Walter, please don't,” she says. “Let's not complicate things.”

I apologize. The idea of forcing oneself on a woman is repellent. Maybe if I felt otherwise, I would have been kissed more.

After a few moments, she says, “I hope you don't mind.”

“Not at all,” I answer gamely. “I felt it was the polite thing, to have at least tried. Didn’t want you to feel insecure.”

She laughs, briefly placing her hand on my knee. “Thank you, Walter. You made me feel much better.”

We are friends again.

At home, the house is silent. She has never been here, I realize. The center of the action was always at Maddy and Harry’s. “Would you like a tour? I promise I won’t pounce.”

“I’d love it.”

The house was built by my great-grandfather. He called it Dunemere. All houses then had names, but it has been a long time since anyone called it that. Back then people rarely built on the beach. Instead, they preferred to be closer to town and arable land, and away from the storms that periodically devastated the shoreline. It was at the end of the nineteenth century that wealthy New Yorkers began to buy beachfront property, where they built enormous summer homes, only to desert them each year shortly after Labor Day.

In the 1960s, my father had the place winterized, primarily so we could spend Christmas here. He insulated the walls, which had been filled with nothing but old newspaper and beer bottles left by the original builders; he also installed a furnace in the basement and radiators in the bedrooms, but it wasn’t until after my parents died and the house fell to me that it really came to be used all year round, though I do shut it up in January and February and drain the pipes so they don’t freeze.

Unlike many of the modern houses in the area, the interior is dark, its dimensions modest for a house of this size. There is no media room. No family-style kitchen. Real estate agents out here would call it a teardown because the new crop of home buyers would find it too old-fashioned. The design is Italianate; cream-colored plaster on the outside, something that would not have looked out of place in Lake Como or Antibes. In old black-and-white photographs, there are striped awnings over the windows. Inside you walk into a high-ceilinged center hallway covered in the dark stucco that was once so fashionable. The stucco keeps it cool. The walls have family portraits and a large, faded Gobelins tapestry my grandfather brought back from the First World War. Straight ahead and out a large door is a wide brick patio, where my parents held their wedding reception. It runs the entire length of the house and overlooks a lawn that slopes down to the large brackish pond that leads to the ocean. Flanking the door are matching life-size portraits of my great-grandparents. My grandfather, a little boy in a sailor suit, stands next to his father, bespectacled and stern. Opposite, my great-aunt, dressed in crinolines, her hair long, leans on her mother's lap.

A long table takes up most of the left side of the hallway, and on it sits an old leather-bound visiting book. The book is almost full. The first entry is nearly as old as I am. The older books are in the library, full of spidery script and long-dead names.

"Please sign your name if you want to," I say.

She does. I have never seen her handwriting before and am not

surprised that it's clear and elegant. My handwriting, like most lawyers', is appalling. She writes her name and date, and then "You have a lovely home."

To the right of the table is the door to a large formal dining room, the site of many endless dinners I was forced to endure as a child when my parents were present, spooning soup and eating heavy meals prepared by Genevieve and served by Robert. The walls are covered in Zuber wallpaper depicting El Dorado. I love that paper. It is a gateway to a different dimension, and on the rare occasions when I throw a formal dinner party I am still capable of losing myself in its magical jungles, canoeing down the Amazon or fighting off Indians with my trusty revolver.

There are eight bedrooms on the second floor. The largest was my great-grandparents'. It is known as the Victorian Room. I think I will have Claire sleep here. The canopied bed is too short for me, but it is where I always put first-time guests. The ones whom I like, at any rate. I still sleep in the same room I occupied as a child, over the kitchen in what had been the nursery wing.

Finally, there is the playroom on the third floor. The biggest in the house, it contains an old pool table, bookshelves crammed with popular novels of my parents' youth—Kipling and Buchan, Ouida, Tom Swift and Robert Louis Stevenson—and chests of drawers filled with exotic costumes brought back over the years by relatives and friends that we used to wear for fancy-dress parties. Along the wall is my great-uncle's oar from Henley and window seats where I would curl up with a book on rainy days.

“We should do a costume ball,” says Claire. She is rummaging through the drawers. She pulls out a Pierrot costume I had worn as a child. It would just fit her. Then a burnoose my father used to wear that made him look like Rudolph Valentino. I had always admired it most because it had a real dagger. “That would be such fun.” It has been a long time since our last costume party.

For a second I almost make another pass at her but think better of it. Maybe she would have said yes this time. Expensive real estate can be a powerful aphrodisiac.

We go back downstairs, and I lead her to her room. It is large, with windows facing over the pond. I imagine it is probably bigger than her entire apartment. The bed is just to the right as you enter, the French linen part of my great-grandmother’s trousseau. Matching bureaus, a dressing table with my great-grandmother’s silver-backed Tiffany hairbrushes still on it, a fireplace, an escritoire, a pair of Louis XV armchairs. Silvered family photographs. My grandfather in his uniform. My grandmother’s three brothers. Heavy, pale damask curtains. A wide stretch of carpet, a chaise longue, and a table with an old-fashioned upright telephone and an equally ancient radio, neither of which has worked in years but which remain in place because that’s where they’ve always been.

“What a wonderful room.”

“It was my great-grandmother’s. It’s something, isn’t it? You know, back then husbands and wives rarely shared a room. My great-grandfather slept next door.” The room as spare as a

Trappist's cell.

“And where do you sleep?”

“On the other side of the house. In the nursery. Now don't look at me like that. It's not like it has Donald Duck posters on the wall. I've updated it somewhat over the years. It's just where I feel most comfortable.”

“But you could sleep in any room in the house.”

“Exactly. And I could eat in the dining room every night and throw costume parties. But I don't. I come here to relax and sleep and work.”

“Don't you get lonely?”

“Never. And besides, Madeleine and Harry are right next door.”

We say our good-nights, and I pad off down the familiar carpet past my parents' former bedroom and the “good” guest room to my old lair. As I lie in bed that night, I fantasize that Claire comes into my room. Once or twice I even venture to the hallway, thinking I may have heard the sound of her feet, but when I finally fall asleep around dawn, I am still alone.

AFTER GRADUATION HARRY WAS COMMISSIONED IN THE Marine Corps. As a college graduate he was automatically entitled to become an officer, and he entered flight training school. Madeleine followed him. They had been married the day after graduation. It was a small ceremony held in Battell Chapel, followed by lunch at the Yale Club. Ned was best man. Madeleine's father and brother, Johnny, came, as well as her stepmother at that time. Mister and Mrs. Winslow. I had never met them before. His father was a prep school English teacher. Tweedy, articulate, wry, the same broad shoulders. Harry had grown up a faculty brat in Connecticut, living on borrowed privilege. A pet of the upperclassmen as a child, and a guest on classmates' ski trips and holidays while a student. Unlike most of them, he worked during the summer, one year as a roustabout on the Oklahoma oil fields, another on an Alaskan fishing boat.

Why the Marines? It struck me as an odd decision at the time. No one we knew was joining the military. Our fathers had been raised when there was a still a draft, but most of them were of an age that fell between the Korean and Vietnam wars. Maddy's father had actually left Princeton to enlist to fight in Korea, an act that had always been difficult for me to square with the debauchee I knew in later life. Or maybe it partly explained it. I wouldn't know, having never been a soldier or even heard a

shot fired in anger.

We never heard Harry discuss going into the military in those waning school days. Most of us had been obsessed with softening the impact of graduation by lining up jobs at investment banks, newspapers, or earnest nonprofit institutions, or obtaining postgraduate degrees. I had known for months that I would be entering law school in the fall, so I simply let the days of May spool out without any particular anxiety.

I had been aware that Harry echoed my outward calm, but he rarely spoke about the future. When he had revealed his intentions over one of those endless farewell dinners to a table consisting of Maddy, myself, Ned, and few other confidants, I could tell I was not the only one surprised. Even Ned, who had landed a job in Merrill Lynch's training program and was Harry's best friend, goggled.

"You're joking, right?" he had asked.

"Not at all," Harry had responded. "I wouldn't joke about something like that. I've always wanted to learn how to fly. Anyway, I'm not good enough to become a pro hockey player, and I have zero interest in working on Wall Street. I really have no idea what I want to do, so I figured while I am making up my mind the least I can do is serve my country."

Maddy, of course, knew. What's more, she obviously approved. If he had told her he was going to become a lion tamer or a salvage diver, she would have followed along just as happily.

As a married couple, they lived off base at the Naval Air

Station in Pensacola for the first year. Harry flew fighters. They had a dog then, a brown mutt named Dexter. Maddy drove the same red MG she had at Yale. They cut a glamorous path wherever they went. Senior officers would be found at their frequent cocktail parties. Their new friends had been football legends at Ole Miss and Georgia Tech, now married to former cheerleaders.

This is when Maddy discovered her talent for cooking. Inspired by the local cuisine and with plenty of time on her hands, she tackled shrimp étouffée, rémoulade, fried chicken, pecan pie. Then she began working her way through Julia Child, Paul Bocuse, James Beard. Soon she was making béchamel sauces, coq au vin, salmon terrines, beef bourguignon, cheese soufflés. Invitations to her dinner parties were as sought after as presidential citations.

During the day, Harry flew endless training missions and sorties, and attended ground school. But luckily there was no war. On weekends, they traveled, driving all night to visit friends on Jupiter Island or to go bonefishing in the Keys. I visited a few times from my first year at Yale Law. They also got moved around by the Corps. Bogue Field, North Carolina. Twentynine Palms in California. A year in Japan. Maddy says this is when Harry began to write. His first efforts went unread by anyone other than her, but she encouraged him. There were numerous short stories and even a novel. All now destroyed.

Once she told me, “When I fell in love with Harry, I never

thought of him as being a writer. He was simply the most confident person I had ever met. He's always determined to be the best. He was the best hockey player, then he was the best pilot, and I guess it just makes sense that he would be the best writer. If he wanted to be the best jewel thief, he could probably do that too."

He kept at it. At some point he began submitting short stories to magazines and literary journals, most of them obscure. Finally he had one published, then another. When his six years were up, he resigned his commission to write full-time. A few years later his first book, a roman à clef about an Air Force officer, met with modest praise and milder sales. Critics recognized him, though, as someone who needed more time in the bottle.

He and Maddy moved to New York, then outside of Bozeman for a year, and after that Paris, where they lived above a Senegalese restaurant in the distinctly unchic 18th Arrondissement. Maddy's trust fund subsidized them, allowing them to get by but not live extravagantly. Johnny was born, and then Harry's second book, which took seven years to write, won the National Book Award. There is even talk of a movie.

But he still loved flying. When his second book was published, he fulfilled a promise to himself and bought a used plane that he fixed up and now kept at the airport near their cottage. On fine-weather days, he would take the plane up. Sometimes he'd invite others to come with him. They'd fly over to Nantucket, circle Sankaty Head and return. Or up to Westerly. Sometimes

he'd touch down for lunch, but he preferred to remain aloft. I flew with him many times. It is very peaceful. Madeleine rarely went. Small planes make her nervous.

FRIDAY MORNING. THE AIRFIELD SITS BEFORE THEM, TANKER trucks idle in the background, the planes of the local elite parked, waiting like ball boys to spring into action. It is just Harry and Claire. She and I had gone over early to the Winslows'.

"I'm going flying," he announced as we walked in. "Anyone want to come?"

I declined. "I'd love to," said Claire. "Do you have your own plane?"

"Yep. A single-engine Cessna 182. She's a little beauty. She's been in for repairs. This is the first time I've been able to fly her all summer."

"Do I need to change?"

"Nope, you're good to go."

At the airport he files his flight plan and does the preflight inspection. Today they will fly over Block Island. The plane is old, but he loves it anyway. The sky is a cloudless blue. It's already warm, a late-summer heat. The little cockpit is stuffy. Harry opens the windows. "It'll cool off when we get higher," he says. He is wearing an old khaki shirt and a faded Yale cap. Around his neck hangs a gold chain. He tells her it is a Saint Christopher he wears for luck. Maddy bought it for him when he was in the Marines. They taxi to the runway. Only one other

plane is ahead of them.

Claire is excited. She feels like a child, practically pressing her nose against the plastic of the window. The engine starts to rev, and they begin to taxi down the runway for takeoff. Harry pushes the throttle and they race forward. One second their landing gear is on the ground, and the next they are in the air, climbing, climbing. The earth falls away beneath them, and when they bank, Claire can see they are already hundreds of feet in the air, the people on the ground, houses, trees rapidly diminishing below her.

At cruising altitude, Harry says, "Some view, eh?" He has to yell now above the engine.

She nods her head, leaning forward in her seat. She can see the curve of the earth and beyond, stretching to the end of the horizon, the blue of the Atlantic. She is amazed by how fast they are moving. What would have taken an hour in a car now takes seconds.

"I've never done this before," she says. "I mean, fly in a small plane. It's incredible."

He points to his right ear. "You'll have to speak up," he yells. "Okay," she yells back, smiling.

He smiles and gives her a thumbs-up, his eyes hidden by his sunglasses. As they fly he points out landmarks. They have now left the mainland behind, soaring godlike over the ocean. A fishing boat, white against the dark blue water, bobs like a toy. Block Island looms in the distance, and then suddenly they are

almost over it. She sees the waves crash on the rocks.

“That’s Bluffs Beach,” he shouts. “Over there is Mohegan Bluffs and Southeast Lighthouse. In between is Black Rock Beach. It’s a nude beach, but I don’t think you can see much from up here.” He smiles.

She looks at him. He is wearing shorts and moccasins, his legs strong and tanned, covered with golden hairs. She wants to touch them. This is the first time they have been alone together. It is hard to speak. She had no idea it would be so loud.

Words formulate in her mouth, but nothing comes out. There is so much she wants to say, but this is the wrong time. In addition to the noise of the engine, he is wearing a headset, further blocking his ears.

“Did you say something?” he asks, lifting the right earpiece to hear her better.

She shakes her head no. Relieved, she feels like someone who has stumbled on a precipice but miraculously regains her balance. Her heart is racing, her palms are sweaty. Nothing has changed.

“Do you want to try it?” he yells, indicating the controls in front of her.

“What? You mean fly the plane?”

“Sure, it’s easy,” he shouts. “Put your hands on the controls. It’s not like a car. The tiller controls the altitude, which means it lets you go up, down, left, and right. If you pull on it, the plane will go up. Push and it goes down, get it? The throttle controls acceleration. See that? That’s the altimeter. It tells you

how high you are. Keep at one thousand feet. That's your airspeed indicator. You're going about a hundred and fifty-five miles an hour now. And see that little instrument that looks like a plane? That's your attitude indicator. Keep it level unless you turn. Okay?"

"What should I do?"

"Don't worry. I'll have my hands on my controls the whole time. Just go ahead and take your controls. They won't bite."

She puts her hands tightly, too tightly, on the tiller. The vibrations from the engine course through her. The plane bucks slightly, and she jumps. "Not so tight," he says. "Relax."

"I'll try." She inhales and exhales quickly several times and then resumes her grip, this time lighter, on the tiller.

"Good. Now just keep her level."

He lets go of the tiller. "See? You're flying the plane now."

"Oh my god. That's amazing." She is giddy. She can't believe how easy it is.

"Want to try a turn?"

She has to strain to hear him. She yells back, "Yes. What do I do?"

"Turn the tiller slightly to the right and then straighten out."

She does, and the plane turns but begins to drop.

"Pull up a bit—but not too much."

She does and the plane levels out again.

"Very nice. Now just keep heading on this course. See over there? That's our airfield." When they get closer, he yells, "You

better let me take over now.”

He contacts the tower, tells them they are approaching, and receives permission to land.

He reaches out his right hand and points. “We’re going to pass over our house. We’re right on the flight path. Look down.”

She cranes her neck. Below is the house, like a diorama in a museum, a microcosm. She is a giant. He begins the landing, flaps down, reducing airspeed. The treetops rise up to meet them. Objects become larger again. They touch down with a slight shudder and a bounce as the air pressure resists the wings. He taxis to his parking spot and kills the engine.

“Not bad,” he says, looking at his watch. “And it’s not even noon yet.”

“Thank you so much. That was one of the most amazing things I’ve ever done,” she says.

Her eyes sparkle. Descending from the cockpit, the rest of the world feels flat and ordinary. She wishes she could return to the clouds.

On the drive back Claire, emboldened, now a risk taker, a conqueror, asks, “What happened to Johnny? I mean, his scar. Walter said he had an operation when he was younger.”

“That’s right. He was born with a congenital heart defect. A hole in his heart.”

“Oh my god. What did you do?”

“There was a series of operations. We took him to the Children’s Hospital in Boston. The first time we were up there

for months. He could have died.”

“How old was he?”

“The first was right after he was born. The last when he was four.”

I remember sleepless nights in the hospital, the monotonous beeping of the monitors, concerned surgeons in blue scrubs, the small, deflated, unconscious form beneath a transparent shield. It was hell.

“Is he all right now?”

Harry rubs his forehead. “I don’t know. I think so. The doctors are optimistic he’ll be okay. It’s been a long time since we had a scare, thank God.”

“He doesn’t seem sick. He seems like an ordinary healthy boy.”

“It’s been hard. He tires easily. And Maddy watches him like a hawk. She’s always on the lookout that something might be wrong. We’ve had some false alarms, but we can’t be too careful. Even if he looks like an ordinary healthy boy, he’s not.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No reason for you to be sorry. We give him love and confidence and try to make his life as normal as possible. He could live another six years or sixty. It’s impossible to know. It’s hard for him at school, though. He can’t play sports. Children can be cruel.”

“It must be very hard on you. I mean on you both.”

“At times it is, but he’s a great kid. He knows what we’re up

to, and he tries to make us feel better. He'll say things to Maddy like, 'It's okay, Mommy. I don't feel sick. Don't worry about me.' But you just can't help feeling so goddamn helpless sometimes, you know?"

"I'm sorry. He's a lovely boy. He's such a wonderful combination of Maddy and you."

They pull up to the house. The boy comes running out. "Daddy, Daddy," he shouts as the tires crunch to a halt on the gravel. I am sitting by the window, reading the newspaper.

"Hey, sport."

"Daddy, there was a telephone call for you. From Rome. Mommy took the message."

"Thanks, pal. Tell Mommy I'm back, okay?" The boy trots back inside.

To Claire, "Got to make a call. Glad you could come along." He gets out of the car.

"No. Thank you for taking me. When can we do it again?"

"Maybe not for a while."

"What do you mean?"

He looks at her, a bit puzzled. "I thought you knew. That's what that call is about. Maddy, Johnny, and I are leaving for Rome in a week. I have a grant to write there. I'll be working on my new book."

"No. No, I hadn't heard." She feels like she is going to be sick. "How long will you be gone?"

"Almost a year. We'll be back next June. For the summer."

“Oh, I see.” And then, “You must be very excited.”

“We are. An old friend of mine found us a place to stay near the Pantheon.”

“What about Johnny? Where will he go to school?”

“There’s an American school. And we have the names of good doctors there.”

“Oh good. I’m so happy for you all.” She tries to make it sound like she means it.

“Thanks. It’ll be a lot of fun. I’ve always wanted to live in Rome. So has Maddy. As you can imagine, she’s very excited about the food. She’s already enrolled in both a cooking and an Italian class.”

“I’m going to miss you.” She throws her arms around his neck and pulls him to her, his cheek next to hers.

He pats her on the back and uncoils himself, smiling at her. “Hey, we’re going to miss you too.”

“Thanks again,” she calls after him as he heads into the house. “I had a wonderful time.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. You were very brave. Not everyone likes to fly in small planes.”

“I loved it.”

He smiles and walks inside the house. She does not notice me and I watch her standing there for a long time after he is gone. Finally, she turns and leaves. I am sorry to see how sad she looks.

I FIND HER SEVERAL HOURS LATER. SHE IS SITTING AT THE end of my dock, staring out over the pond, her feet

dangling in the water. A family of swans swims by. A pair of Beetle Cats, the small, gaff-rigged sailboats popular with residents who live on the pond, tacks in the distance. It is very peaceful.

“Where have you been?” I ask. “We’ve been looking everywhere for you. We’re going to play tennis.”

Yes, I have a tennis court too. It’s an old-fashioned clay court. I know a lot of people prefer acrylic these days, but I actually still enjoy rolling the court. The preparation as important as the play.

She looks up. Surprised at first and then disappointed, as though she were hoping for someone else. I am in my ratty old tennis whites.

“I’m sorry, Walter. I needed to be alone for a while.”

“Everything all right?”

“Did you know that Harry and Maddy are going to Rome?”

“Of course.”

“I didn’t.”

“Is that so terrible?”

“Yes. I mean, no. I don’t know.”

“You have something against Romans? Did a princepe ever break your heart, or did you trip and fall on the Spanish Steps?”

I am trying to be light, but I can tell, too late, she is not in the mood.

She shakes her head silently.

“Anything I can do?”

She shakes her head again.

“Right. Well, I’ll just leave you to it then, shall I?”

“Thank you, Walter. I just feel like being alone. Maybe I’ll wander up later and see how the tennis is going.”

“I hope so. You owe me a rematch.” She manages a smile at that. The week before she leveled me, 6–4, 6–4.

We don’t see her again until evening. After tennis, I tiptoe up to her room and see that her door is closed. At seven she comes down. I am in the kitchen, putting hamburger patties into a cooler. We are going to a cookout on the beach. It’s a Labor Day weekend tradition. There will be about fifty people there. Ned, Harry, and I had gone to the beach earlier to build a bonfire, digging a pit in the sand, filling it with driftwood.

“Sorry I didn’t make it to tennis,” she says as she enters. “I wouldn’t have been any fun.”

“Feeling better?”

“Yes, thanks.” She looks beautiful. A low-cut pink dress. She is not wearing a bra. The sides of her breasts peeking out from behind the fabric. I try not to stare.

“You look lovely, but you might want to bring a sweater or something,” I suggest. “It can get pretty cold on the beach at night this time of year.”

“I could really use a martini, Walter. Do you think you could make one for me?”

“With pleasure,” I say, washing my hands and going to the bar. It is a form of communion. I drop the ice cubes into an old Cartier silver shaker that belonged to my grandfather. Add Beefeater gin

and a dash of dry vermouth. I stir it, twenty times exactly, and pour it into a chilled martini glass, also silver, which I garnish with a lemon peel.

“Hope you don’t mind drinking alone. I want to pace myself.”

“Oh, you’re such a fuddy-duddy, Walter.” She takes a sip.

“Perfect.”

Ned and Cissy come in. “Priming the pump, eh?” says Ned.

“Want one?” I ask.

“No thanks. Plenty to drink at the beach.”

“Sorry not to see you at tennis today,” Cissy says to Claire.

“Everything all right?”

She nods her head. “Yes, thanks. Just a bit tired, that’s all. You know how it is.”

“Just as well, I suppose. You missed seeing my man get his big butt kicked by Harry.”

“Harry had a hell of a serve today,” I put in. “He could do no wrong. Don’t feel too bad, Ned. Pete Sampras couldn’t have beaten him today.”

“Yeah, well. I’ll get him the next time.”

“You’ll have to wait until next summer then, won’t you?” pipes up Claire. “Unless you’re going to go all the way to Rome to play a few sets.”

We all stare at Claire, surprised by her tone. Then Cissy says, “Look at it this way, Neddy. At least you’ll have a whole year to practice.”

Everyone laughs at that. “C’mon, Claire, drink up,” says Ned.

We take my car, Ned in the front with me, the women in back. “Aren’t we going with Harry and Maddy?” asks Claire.

“They’re going to meet us there,” says Ned. “They are bringing their houseguests.”

A Dutch couple. Wouter and Magda. He is in publishing. They have just dropped off their daughter at boarding school and are passing through on the way back to Amsterdam. Their English is flawless.

The sun is setting low over the ocean when we drive up. A finger of brilliant orange extends from one end of the horizon to the other, as far up and down the beach as we can see. There’s already a good crowd. I recognize many of the faces, some from the club, others from Manhattan, the rest a scattering of literary types, friends of Harry and Maddy’s. The fire is roaring. Tables have been set up. There are hurricane lamps and coolers full of wine and beer. Liquor bottles, ice cubes, and mixers. Plastic cups. Several large trash bins. There are a few children. Labradors. By the lip of the parking lot, piles of shoes.

“Can you make me another martini, Walter?” Claire asks. I notice she didn’t bring a sweater after all.

“Of course. But remember the old rule about women’s breasts.”

“You have such a dirty mind.” She winks at me. “Don’t worry, Walter. This is the last big party of the summer, right? Loosen up. Let’s have some fun.”

There’s no shaker, but I still make her a drink. “Not my best

effort, I'm afraid," I say.

"You're very sweet, Walter. Thank you." She gives me a little peck on the cheek.

"After this, though, you'd better stick to wine."

"When will Harry and Maddy be here?"

"Haven't a clue. Soon enough, I should think."

I excuse myself to drop off the hamburger patties. When I look around, I notice that Claire has moved. She is talking to three young men. They are about her age, tanned, slim-hipped as soccer players. The sons of rich men. I should know. I was one of them once, lifetimes ago. She is laughing. I can tell she is mesmerizing them.

Harry, Maddy, and Johnny arrive with Wouter and Magda. "Sorry we're late," Harry says when I see him. "We're still packing up. A year's a long time to be gone."

I am already planning on spending Christmas with them in Rome.

By nine o'clock the first stage of the party is winding down. It gets dark quickly this time of year. Parents carry sleepy children to their cars. Tables are folded. Empty wine bottles clink in recycling bins. The fire remains high, still being stoked by those who aren't ready to go yet. For the young the night is just getting started. Flames shoot up into the night. Faces flicker in the firelight. The sand begins to feel cool underfoot. I am about to put on my sweater, but I look around for Claire, worrying that she might be cold.

She is still talking with one of the young men, holding a drink in one hand, rubbing a bare arm with her hand. I go up to her. “Sorry for interrupting. Claire, are you cold? Would you like my sweater?”

Claire looks at me, her face luminous, eyes glazed. She is drunk.

“Walt,” she says. “That’s so sweet. I’d like you to meet Andrew. His parents have a house out here. He’s going to business school.”

We shake hands. Andrew is wondering about me and where I fit in. I am possibly too old to be a boyfriend but too young to be a father.

“I’m staying with Walt. His parents have a house out here too, but they’re both dead and now Walt lives there all alone.”

Ignoring her, I repeat, “Are you cold?”

“No, I’m fine. Feel great.”

“So you don’t need my sweater?”

“I have a sweater if she gets cold,” Andrew says pointedly.

She ignores him and asks me, “Have Harry and Maddy arrived?”

“Yes. They’ve been here awhile.”

She looks around and sees them. She frowns. “Oh yes, there they are.” She turns to Andrew. “I have to go say hi to some people. I’ll be right back.”

She walks over and gives Maddy a hug. “I didn’t know you were going away. Harry told me this morning. I know I should

be happy for you both, but it makes me sad.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll be back before you know it. The summer’s over anyway.”

“Well, that’s just it. I don’t want the summer to end. Just knowing that you won’t be here makes it so much more final.”

Maddy squeezes her hand. “I know. I never want summer to end either.”

“It was just such a surprise.”

“I am sorry we didn’t tell you. It had all been settled last winter, and it just never occurred to us that you didn’t know too.”

“You don’t need to apologize. You have both been amazing to me. I love you both so much.” She gives Maddy another hug.

“We’ll miss you too.”

Claire turns away and walks back to Andrew, who gets her another glass of wine. I am not sure this is such a good idea, but it’s not my place to say anything.

“Everything okay?” Harry asks, munching a hamburger. He and I had stood aside while the two women talked, and now we rejoin Maddy. “You worried about something?”

“I’m not sure,” I say. “Claire seems to be drinking rather a lot.”

Harry laughs softly. “Yeah, well, she won’t be the only one at this party.”

Maddy looks at him. “I think she’s taking the news of our trip hard. Why else would she be getting drunk? We’ve spent plenty of nights with her, and she’s never been like this. What was she like when you told her this morning?”

“Well, I could tell it was a surprise. I felt like an ass because obviously she had no idea what I was talking about.”

“I saw her down by the pond before tennis,” I add. “She looked pretty glum.”

“Well, I can understand that,” says Maddy. “We sort of adopted her and now we’re dropping her.”

“Oh, she’d have gotten tired of us before too long anyway,” says Harry. “I mean, she needs to spend more time with people her own age. We’re just a gang of middle-aged old farts with receding hairlines and expanding waistlines.”

“Speak for yourself, fatso,” says Maddy, punching him playfully in the arm. Actually, both of them look great for their age. I, on the other hand, look every one of my forty-two years.

We see Claire on the other side of the bonfire and watch as she stumbles and nearly falls. Andrew helps her, and she hangs on his arm, laughing. Have I said she has beautiful teeth?

“She does look pretty sozzled,” says Harry. “Do you think we should do something?”

“I’ll go over and talk to her,” says Maddy. “You two stay here.”

Across the fire I can see Maddy speaking with her. The boy stands sheepishly off to the side. Maddy has a hand on Claire’s shoulder. Claire is shaking her head, attempting to back away. But it is very hard to say no to Maddy.

They come back. “Harry, do you mind driving Claire back to Walter’s?”

“Please,” protests Claire. “I’m fine. Please. I don’t want Harry

to drive me back.”

“Hey, what’s going on?” It’s Andrew.

I step in and tell him in my most lawyerly voice that he should probably get the hell out of there.

“Don’t make me,” Claire shouts. “Maddy, can you drive me instead?”

“It’s okay,” says Maddy. “We need to help clean up.” Maddy hates driving at night. Her eyes aren’t as good as they used to be, and she dislikes wearing glasses.

“Come on, Claire,” says Harry gently. He puts his hand on her arm.

She pulls it away. “Leave me alone.”

She starts walking unsteadily to the parking lot, Harry following. “I’ll be right back,” he says.

By the car she is sick.

“Oh god,” she says. “I’m sorry. I’m such an idiot.”

He tells her not to worry. We’ve all been there. He offers her his handkerchief, and then insists she wear his sweater when he sees she is shivering. “Are you all right, or do you think you’ll be sick again?”

She shakes her head. “No, I’ll be fine,” she answers, her voice faint.

On the way back, she is weeping softly, embarrassed and anxious. Harry asks if she’s all right. Why is she so upset? Claire says she doesn’t want to talk about it. He says that it’s all right, they’re friends. If it’s something he can help with, he’d be happy

to.

“I’m in love with you,” she blurts. “There, I’ve said it. I’m sorry.”

He laughs and tells her that it’s only the liquor talking.

“Don’t laugh at me,” she says.

He tries to reassure her. That he is not laughing at her.

“Stop the car,” she says calmly. “I think I have to throw up again.”

He pulls over, headlights illuminating the road ahead. The houses slumbering. She jumps out and instead of being sick starts running across a field in the dark. Harry curses under his breath, gets out and runs after her, yelling at her to stop. She is barefoot, and he catches her easily. Panicked like an animal, she tries to escape, twisting her body and swinging at him with her little fists. He grabs her wrists. She is gasping for breath and sobbing about how stupid she is, that he should go away. He tries to soothe her, telling her to calm down, saying what a wonderful, beautiful girl she is. She embraces him fiercely, still sobbing. He strokes her hair. She looks up at him, and he looks down at her.

Her face rises to his, her lips on his, her tongue in his mouth. “Make love to me,” she pleads, placing his hand on her breast. Immediately she can feel him hardening. “I love you. I need you. Now. Here.”

But he does not. “I can’t,” he says. “I’m married. I love my wife. Don’t do this.”

“But what about me?” she asks. “Do you love me?”

“You’re a beautiful girl,” he says. “You shouldn’t be doing this. I’m married.”

“I can’t help myself,” she says. “I need you. Please.”

“Claire, for God’s sake. Don’t make this more difficult than it already is. We should go. Come with me. Please.” He holds out his hand, but she refuses it, walking past him to the car.

They drive in silence. There is nothing to say. He gets out of the car to open her door but she is already out and heading toward my house, the key under the mat. She says nothing.

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