

Alexander Theroux
An
Adultery

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PIECE OF WORK - A PSYCHOLOGICAL
MASTERPIECE IN WHICH THE PROSE IS
OF CLASSIC STATURE, THE
IMAGERY JUST, AND THE CAPACITY
FOR CHARACTER ANALYSIS
IMMENSELY SOPHISTICATED.
IT IS ALSO VERY ENJOYABLE'

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PALADIN

Love into Loathing



Christian Ford is a 36-year-old painter in New England with a wonderful girlfriend in Boston. One autumn day he walks into an art gallery and is instantly captured by the beauty of a young woman called Farol Colorado – the surname, her husband's. An adulterous affair begins in which every meeting becomes a desertion, every painting a capitulation as Farol refuses to leave the marriage she detests. Too late, Christian grows to see Farol as self-absorbed, greedy mediocrity she is, yet still is unable to leave her – even when she starts to see other men.

In *An Adultery*, which is both Christian's account of the affair as well as his own confession, he – the betrayer and the betrayed – attempts to understand the dangerously paradoxical nature of human relations and to show that adultery extends beyond mere physical infidelity to a world of intolerable inversion where every rule becomes an infraction, every luxury a privation, and every privilege a forfeiture.

ALEXANDER THEROUX

An Adultery

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‘The painter’s brush consumes his dream.’

– W.B. YEATS, ‘Two Songs from a Play’

They exchanged pictures as was the habit in those days. Each painter chose the one of the other one that presumably interested him most. Matisse and Picasso chose the picture that was undoubtedly the least interesting either of them had done. Later each one used it as an example, the picture he had chosen, of the weakness of the other one.

– GERTRUDE STEIN, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*

‘One boy’s a boy. Two boys are half a boy. Three boys are no boy at all.’

– ALEXANDER THEROUX

Part One

1

All women are mortal. I wonder if I believed it that autumn day I walked into the art gallery in St Ives, New Hampshire – I paint – and saw her for the first time. She was a tall, striking woman about thirty or so who worked with her head down as if she'd have to work that way, framing, until the day she died. She was wearing trousers and a maroon turtleneck jersey under a light quilted vest and had the stamp, I thought, of someone often photographed. And yet she seemed sad. Was it perhaps because she was new to the place and had yet made no friends? I didn't know. My only thought was: *lovely*.

There was something lankily tomboyish in her movements. Her shoulders, though shapely, were almost too sturdy in comparison with her smallish head and slight bosom. Her hair was ash blond, like flax, and cut in the dutch-boy fashion, her athletic body showing the kind of beauty that is often indistinguishable from good health.

She looked up at me. She seemed to know immediately what I felt as unreservedly her eyes met mine. But it was a look of silent detachment as much, it seemed, from the two other women working at tables near her, moons to her sun, as from anything whatsoever intrusive, including such customers (I imagined there couldn't be few) so instantly captured as I by the mixture of vulnerability and strength composing her beauty. I felt in that look an invitation to know her further, although she said nothing. I had a girlfriend in Boston at the time to whom I was attached, not so much, however, that I wasn't taken with and in fact slightly oppressed by the memory of this woman much of the following week. I thought of her. I kept thinking of her. And then I didn't think of her again.

Her name was Farol Colorado.

The surname, her husband's – it took some time to learn both – almost served itself as a dark and desperate coloration to those first unsettling, now solved questions, and the next few weeks I spent my free afternoons either working on canvases or walking around to take in the beautiful foliage that held all that month. It was the beginning of my second year living in St Ives, where to meet expenses I'd been teaching at the prep school there, a distinguished one, which a few hundred years ago had given the town its name.

I'd been moderately successful as a painter and sold things, watercolors mostly, landscapes, oil on wood panels, and lately primitives had begun to attract me. One of my 'yellow' paintings, *Marina Among Giant Cowslips and Tulips*, hangs along with my small reputation in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. My palette is chromatic. I find monochrome severe and negative shape gloomy. I've always avoided reflections in the rain. My wants were few. In a way, I was too busy to make money. I was thirty-six, and still hadn't married. I wanted to, but nothing yet had come of it. I was

nevertheless happy, silly word I suppose. But things had been falling together for me.

This seemed confirmed in a wonderful way sometime around mid-October when I stopped by the gallery to have a picture framed, and Farol smiled at me. We talked briefly. She told me with some self-deprecation – she had an elusive and regionless accent – that she'd always been the unapproachable type. I approached, however, and the next day I returned with a painting of mine I wanted her to have, small compensation, I felt, for the generosity of self she had begun to reveal.

'You're new around here?'

'Not really. This is my second year in St Ives. Academic year,' I added. 'I teach up on the hill.' I paused. 'But you're new.'

'Oh, I'm new everywhere,' she said with level green eyes.

'New in the sense of recent,' I asked playfully, 'or unused?'

She laughed.

I wrote down my address for her – with some misgivings, I might add, less for the fact, oddly enough, that she was married than for the lack of privacy there in the inner part of the shop where invariably we stood surrounded by those goosishly attentive middle-aged colleagues of hers whose gongster-loud voices always diminished upon anyone's entrance and whose ears somehow always grew in proportion to their sudden interest in the proximate conversation. Some time passed. I didn't hear from her, and soon I began to be busy.

And then one night, late and unannounced, Farol Colorado appeared at my door, pushing the bell and standing hesitantly back in the shadows. I was surprised to see her. I never quite believed she'd come. Something in me also wondered if I really wanted her to. My passion, strangely enough, often took that form of love which avoided dealing with what was near, refusing the immediate and inventing distance in order to realize, I don't know, perhaps even exalt, someone more completely. I've often felt that way. Don't participate, happiness lies in the imagination, not the act, that sort of thing.

It's hard to explain, but I've always found something terrible in what we have that also can be lost – a melancholy thought, but one that's come to make me work a certain way. By working quickly I've always tried to reduce to nothing the margin for reflection between the canvas and myself. It's kept me from giving a formula to any of the thoughts overflowing in my mind. They changed ceaselessly, like painting. Truth can at any moment become its opposite: to halt an image you have to go further than movement. At any rate, I invited Farol in. She paused, jangling her car keys, and asked if she'd come at a bad time. I knew what she meant: *are you with someone?*

There was something drawn-in about her. She didn't look young so much as she came near to looking fit. She was determined, not graceful, and swung her arms and shoulders when she walked. Once we were upstairs I found in my own lack of composure maddeningly little to say to her of value as she explained over a glass of

wine, and in a kind of disconnected way, what she'd been going through – she mentioned her husband – these last few years. They'd recently moved to New Hampshire, bought a house, and weren't very happy. I realized it wasn't tightness I saw in her. She wasn't nervous. She was dry and matter-of-fact, almost phlegmatic.

I listened to her somewhat sadly, for if beauty was her first accomplishment, a troubled spirit was the next, and the distinction, I'd soon come to see, her name first produced the mention of. She seemed practical, almost aggressively so, and very conscious of her rights; she was also intimidated by reflection and, I thought, doubtful. But then what did I know? We were strangers to each other.

I watched her as I listened. She had a lovely balanced mouth, though somewhat impersonal and noncommittal, with lips everted and a bit too full. Her pert and upturned nose resembled a short pretty thumb. The perfection of her soft green eyes gave a magnificence to every inclination of her head, yet when she glanced away her profile somehow belonged to someone different. She seemed uniquely able to convey an almost disembodied spirituality, a kind of untouchable remoteness, and a real physicality both at the same time. But she bore her body uncomfortably, and it robbed her of character. 'My head's too small,' she said when I complimented her looks.

Or was it the hair style? Tall women with their hair cut short tend to look pin headed. She was also a bit wedge-bottomed, too long in the waist, and had, I saw, a blond person's myopia – eyeglasses, she said, didn't look right on her – as she peered around my rooms looking at my work. She seemed interested. And it gave me an opening.

I told her something of my own life. I talked at some length. I figured if nothing else I was at least a change from the women she worked with at the gallery. I said they'd always struck me as rather pathetic, she quickly agreed, and her smile put me at ease. I motioned to some of my work beyond the mess of solvents and thinners, varnish mediums, bottles of glue water, half-sized canvases, and row upon row of dry pigments in glass jars.

'I'll summon up the mighty effort it takes,' I said, 'not to discuss my paintings and just say I hope you like them. I'll bet you collect antiques – it's okay, I used to – and please tell me you don't jog.' She didn't jog. She rode a bicycle. And swam. Or said she wanted to. She said because of work she had no time for anything. I could understand. I mentioned teaching. I said jobs cost money to keep.

Farol smiled and said she loved the way I talked. I have a tendency to speak with the spasmodic cadences of a person who wants words out of the way in a hurry and along with something of a regional accent have a way of extending my vowels so that I seem to be racing through lists of possible meanings of statements in mid-word, almost stuttering to get on with an idea. She noted humorously I had a lot of opinions. 'Oh, and theories,' I said. 'Tons. Staring's rest. Conversation pets cats. Children from the same family always have different parents. There should be blue tulips.' I saw she was amused, and touching the scarf I always wore, added, 'A muffler's a hug.'

‘Nothing else?’ laughed Farol.

‘Only the observation that in zoos people have the most direct emotional connection to penguins,’ I laughed. ‘And there should be a law prohibiting anyone under age twenty-six from marrying.’

‘Why?’ She looked suddenly embarrassed.

‘The divorce rate’s too high.’ A crimson blush rose high in her cheeks as she turned away. She sighed, sucking in her cheeks, and lowered her head. It was awkward. I felt her inconfidence immediately, a side of her (at complete loggerheads with what is expected in beauty of self-assurance) she ascribed, when I mentioned it, not to what I’d presumed was an unhappy marriage, though this entered into it, but oddly enough to her father, an artist, she from childhood loved far more, she felt, than he her – I thought I heard a therapist’s echo – a matter of import apparently in that she admitted to an interest in the arts herself, drawing, sculpting, whatever.

‘I guess I’ve always wanted his approval,’ she said, adding that his small capacity for praise, indeed recognition, had in consequence left her all her life, she said, with feelings of little adequacy and less worth.

As she spoke she used words lightly, glancingly, and not always correctly. There were only hints of things, no declarations. I noticed she visibly squirmed at the possibility of verbal accident and when doing so a flushing jump to change the subject quickly followed.

It was a brief story: painful trial, apologetic error. Mistakes. The real-life version of herself now looked up. For an instant she seemed close to her father again, or so I thought, for then she turned away murmuring in a tone nonetheless penetrating for being low, ‘I feel very much alone.’

I reached sympathetically for her arm. She looked at me. She asked me if I was involved with anyone. I told her halfheartedly I was. I was, halfheartedly. Direct questions didn’t seem to bother her – or offend me, why should they? – but she seemed to be contemplating a future at once so dreary and insecure with an indifference, or maybe an objectivity, in which she felt a kind of determinism that it didn’t seem to matter what the answer was. ‘I have fears,’ she tried to explain. I discovered myself wanting to get at everything my visitor represented, to enter into her consciousness, to be, as it were, on her side. But I didn’t know how to respond. What does one say under such circumstances?

‘But you’re beautiful,’ I said. ‘You’re –’

It was immediately clear that wasn’t what she wanted to hear, she seemed to cringe, and I realized she had heard that much too often.

‘I don’t feel beautiful. I feel useless,’ she said. ‘I’ve always defined myself by what I’m not.’ It was almost as if making a gloss on that thought that she suddenly looked at her watch with some alarm, and standing up to finish her drink said she had to leave. ‘I’m sorry. Don’t mind me. I should just go off somewhere and make some decisions

is what I should do.'

I found a sort of hard-won courage in it all. She struck me as a symbol of all sorts of beautiful lost things. But the lost dialogue taking place between the bravest part of her and the rest left nothing to know. It was clear at least to her – though I felt it – she appeared better than she was. I couldn't have said what I felt about her except that she seemed undefended. I became aware that protection was wholly absent from her life. I truly couldn't fathom her being lost on someone. My imagination couldn't reach that far, at least not without my heart dissolving in front of her. And I felt ashamed for being powerless, not so much in changing her sad life, but frankly in failing to feel more about it.

We were walking downstairs. She stopped on the lower landing, and grew somewhat meditative. She said I'd accomplished a lot. 'Nothing worth mentioning,' I said. 'I've led mostly a furtive, reclusive life, preaching loudly from the sidelines and avoiding danger.' I smiled. 'A love of creation stimulates a wish to create. And I guess I do what I love. But painting is only another way of looking at painting – the pictures we paint we are also being shown.' Her silence made me continue. 'It's not magic, only necessity. I've often wondered if the secret at the core of all creativity hasn't something to do with –'

'Go ahead.'

'Well, I was going to say hasn't something to do with a desire beyond that need.' I shrugged. 'You know?'

I shrugged.

'Human desire.'

Looking strangely troubled by those words, Farol turned away and peered through a dark window by the door. I thought she was going to cry. 'I know,' she said in a trembling voice. 'I know that.' As we stood there I felt the sorrow of her heart enter mine. I was busy struggling to understand why she'd come, bewildered in a way who she was, yet out of some music in her heart, or perhaps an ache for it in mine, one note sounded the same, and immediately I felt the same sorrow, shared the same heart. And I touched her.

She turned quickly, and this time she was in my arms. She whispered, 'I love to be hugged,' her pelvis lifting against me. And we met in an imploring inexplicable kiss. Her tongue parted my lips, and while I remember its warmth left a pull on my soul equal to nothing less than the same plaintive cry within it, the full magnitude of that moment, its extent and consecutive intoxication, no prodding of memory has ever allowed me to recall.

I only know when I looked up she was gone.

2

An affair began.

I had a small bed in my house and little furniture. I can't bear eye distractions when I work. I lived at the dead end of a long winding lane in the last house, no one ever bothered us, and the privacy it left us always made Farol sexually vibrant. I often saw her around noon during her lunch break when she'd stop by and ask if she could come by after work. 'I'll make it worth your while,' she'd say roguishly, laughing in her eyes. Sometimes her husband was away. And when it was convenient she stayed all night. Her ritual of going to bed never varied: she'd set out the glass of water, take out her contacts, unhook her earrings, and slipping into bed wriggle up close to me with a suction kiss to my shoulder.

She had eyelash kisses, cowpecks, pushsoft kisses, lizard kisses, bitesucks, flicks, and of course deep soulful kisses with the tongue. We even had a special kiss of our own devising where one tightly pressed one's lips together and noiselessly bonked the other's. Silliness, initially, lessened our inhibitions. We smoked pot sometimes. It often made her flush. And babble. She was somewhat proud of her fair skin and described herself as a 'pink person,' me a 'yellow' one, an oversimplified distinction, amusing her, by which she used to theorize body humors and, as I recall, temperaments.

At first it was simple sex. Her lovemaking was less passionate than technically proficient, the bourgeois solidity of marriage fighting the craving to be wild. She wasn't sure how much skill to show in bed, which made her both detached and desperate at the same time. She clearly felt lust but in a manner both half-shrewd and half-innocent didn't want to confess to having had too much experience. But she had strong sexual urges, and after a while no longer tried to hide them. She loved oral sex. And the sensation of roughness, even domination. 'Make me suck you,' she'd whisper, 'force me to. I love that. I like everything. I'll do anything you want.' She had shuddering orgasms making love, arching forward whenever I climaxed and deeply pressing my back and buttocks into her to feel the rush in a hot, heaving abandon. I'd gasp gold, and she'd roll up flushed and happy, kissing my eyes, sitting astride me sometimes to give me a rubdown.

Her hands, while large, were tender and gentle and narrow-palmed. And afterwards she would curve her body into the soft reception of my arms and say, 'I feel comfortable with you.' She would kiss me. 'I do, I do. You make me feel like myself.' And then we would go to sleep.

I began to notice, however, even in the middle of the night that she was always alert. I knew she was a light sleeper, but this was uncanny. I would merely stir, never mind get up and in that very instant – this could be two or three in the morning – she'd immediately awake doubtful and asking, 'What's the matter?' or 'Are you all right?' It

always happened, and I was astonished each time. What seemed strangely inconsistent with this was that she also had nightmares – terrible ones – in which she’d cry out in her sleep, and then sit up gasping, sweat gleaming on her small tallowy breasts, and claiming the room was too hot. She spoke later of hearing knocking. I was confused by it all until I suddenly realized they were of course related. I shouldn’t have been surprised. Alertness and anxiety. Wasn’t it a case of one merely calling to the other?

The following morning it was as though she were someone else. Farol would kiss me, maybe listen a moment for a whistling bird, and then slowly inch closer into my body with the special way she had, like a cat, stretching sensuously and twisting her soft but supple body in a reach of awakening love to greet the day. It was always one of her most beautiful moments. She might pause a minute, taking a sip of water, to narrate some dream or other in a matter-of-fact way, then get up, hook in her earrings, pull on her shirt and trousers, and carefully picking up those contact lenses the color of Pernod – always licking them with her tongue before she put them in – run downstairs, jump in her car, and drive off to the gallery.

She was simple and unadorned and full of helpful ideas, freely offered, as to how we could continue seeing more of each other without complication. ‘I can come over tonight,’ she’d say, or ‘Want to have lunch?’ My interest in her was mainly sexual; she represented nothing to me that I wanted beyond that. I thought it was best that way. What sex adds to friendship is possessiveness, and we were in this for entirely different reasons. We spent most of our time laughing, making love, sometimes even talking – the sort of easy affable remarks a man and woman make when seeking to readjust themselves and quell the after-effects of intimate physical relations.

I learned more about her. She enjoyed gardening. She liked wickerwork. And of course biking and swimming. (‘I have six-liter lungs,’ she boasted.) She sewed. She said she had several old egg beaters and wanted to start a collection. And she loved to eat, among her favorite things being brownies, tapioca, chocolate malts. Eggs Benedict. Oh, and strawberry rhubarb pie! ‘Yummo!’ she exclaimed. She played volley-ball and enjoyed mime. She said she liked music and mentioned *Bolero* and the *New World Symphony*. She once owned an MG, she told me, and loved cars. She spoke a great deal about cars.

‘So you like to travel?’ I asked.

‘I’ve seen a lot of the United States. But I had a grandfather who was a sea captain in Nova Scotia and sailed around the world lots of times. He had three missing fingers! And look.’ She pointed to an almost imperceptible scar she had over one eye. ‘From a tobogganing accident when I was twelve. I should have girded my loins,’ she laughed. ‘Instead I went flying!’

I came to see certain favorite words and expressions she liked to repeat, with a flourish of self-consciousness and a pronunciation usually as flat as a duck’s instep like *maple surple* and *roast beef au jus* and *gird your loins*. And I also couldn’t help but notice she never used the word *marriage*, only *relationship*.

And she loved nature. She said she was an amateur bird-watcher (I'd noted the Audubon sticker on her car window) and could do with amazing accuracy a whole array of animal sounds, ducks, pigs, croaking frogs, a lapping dog, but far and away the best of all was the jungle sound of a whooping gorilla, which, with my encouragement, she performed several times – loudly, I must say – and with radiant embarrassment! 'Would you like to eat?' I'd asked. She'd play along with it. 'What do you have?' 'Coconuts.' '*Wooh-wooh-wooh, ya-ya-ya!*' came her wild reverberant shrieks, echoing through my rooms as if they were the rain forests of Gombe. One of her early nicknames, Farol said laughing, was 'Yodel.'

Above all, she liked being in the woods and climbing mountains and near open lakes and said of all the many things in life she might have been she wished she'd been born a sea otter. 'And not a penguin?' I asked.

She laughed. 'How about you?'

'A jumbo shrimp,' I said. 'That way I could be both large and small at the same time.'

We arranged our moods as best we could to prevent the seriousness we each thought would spook the other, leaving me bewildered as to her mysterious selves. Her career of ups and downs had rubbed most of the hallmarks off her, so that it was not easy to discern her intelligence or guess her age or know the social background to which she properly belonged. Her select conversation, in fact, not only failed to explain her background, it indicated she preferred it that way. I didn't care. I wanted it that way myself. She seemed nevertheless to show a lineage in direct contradiction to her lot.

I saw her at strange, irregular intervals, the headlights of her blue Honda Accord always turning up the winding side street where I lived as if searching a way out of a maze far darker and more nameless than those particular but unpredictable nights when she could get away. She had more time than she cared to admit. Wasting it she connected to a lack of accomplishment. Her lack of accomplishment she linked to lack of money. Money was a favorite subject with her. And flight. I didn't blame her because I understood. As to her husband, we agreed it was something we would not discuss. But her super-simple notions and pardonable if unsubtle fictions about solving everything by making one key move truly amazed me.

I saw on nearer view that Farol's elegance was intermittent, that her parts didn't always match. It came to me slowly, sometimes dimly, but there was something of an indication now of what I might be getting in for. She often looked when she appeared as if she had been crying. It was the face, more than anything, of someone undergoing martyrdom not by fire but by freezing. She was often tense and pulled-in. I could tell, despite her interest in me, that she was angry at her husband and yet terrified at the estimable image of her I insisted on holding to keep her at some sort of breathing distance but which somehow made her responsible, as time passed, for all she wasn't. And didn't mean. And couldn't be. And shouldn't have.

I felt her chronic uncertainty, and shared it. But wondering of myself whether I

needed someone to be independent of or to be dependent on me before I could care seemed at the time irrelevant. I was merely trying to determine whether in all of it I *liked* her or not. She took getting used to, as I'm sure I myself did for finding that a problem. She was mercurial and on first acquaintance glinting with inconsequent confusion. And though occasionally she'd try to explain various things, her explanations only deepened darkness.

She'd spoken only vaguely of her husband. Her comments seemed to ask for no reply. I thought she despised him in an unspoken way but didn't have the vocabulary for the fierce emotions she felt. Their news conveyed nothing whatever to me. Only the rational surface of my intelligence was engaged. And rationality with her I could already tell was the exception to the rule. Whereas at first she spoke constantly of her fears – increasingly she tended toward the abstract – now she hadn't the words to express them or found them in spite of the deep moans reverberating through her too unbearable to utter. The closer we got, the more secrets there were to guard. She'd become a good friend. She was also a stranger.

Initially, neither of us had any individual experience that seemed to fit us for an altogether conscientious estimate of all we could together become, and whenever our thoughts did wander to some tale or circumstance that threatened to present a parallel – for we were persuaded at times we did think alike – we somehow always ended up by deciding our situation was not to be measured by any other, an attempt, I think, to protect whatever it was that by chance allowed us to meet in the first place. Or was it rather our fear of repeating by habit all we were afraid we might lose?

It was, in short, that period of procedural confusion in which two people trying to please one another act out their own interpretation of what each thinks the other wants. Both wear masks, of course, trying feverishly not to be caught without them. Imitation of emotions, always sad, sometimes dangerous, follow in response. And you soon begin to resent what you cannot be – yourself.

Farol was alone. Not caring was being alone. I understood much of her by what she reminded me of in myself. But there was always that place where one had to begin again. Where is happiness unless you give happiness away? The irony was that it was easier for me to share it with a relative stranger than for her to share it with a husband she claimed was indifferent to it, for now she began to mention conflicts with him (conflicts, I noticed, that never left her in the wrong). I listened, and I tried to sympathize. I certainly didn't want to put the boot in. I told her I cared. I did, to a great degree. I sometimes felt guilty in sharing her guilt, sometimes not. I think at the time I told myself I wanted to be courageous enough, which was a lie, to risk losing innocence, which was a lie, to see if I might come to love her, which was the biggest lie of all.

I didn't care. I doubted she could ever understand me, for one thing. It wasn't that I was so deep, she simply didn't seem the type of person who'd bother to find out. Secondly, I've always been suspicious of conclusions that reinforce uncritical hope,

and I could already see I puzzled her. I was strange, a bit uncivilized, too intense, used to solitude, up at all hours of the night, and in many ways too eccentric for her. But the unavoidable truth of the matter was, I didn't want to get involved.

Surely she suspected that. I thought she felt the same way herself. I was taking advantage of her, but where was the difference if she was using me to abuse her husband? I wanted her body, not her complicity, and I wanted to keep it that way. The way I understood her fatigued me, but it also told me how little I cared, and I was challenged more than entertained by the pointless conversation that was always the result of both. We went to bed, we seemed to remember each other only when next we met, and then went to bed again.

Whenever we finished having sex, I was often silent and usually thinking to myself: *thank you for having allowed me, without interruption, my special thoughts.* What showed on her face was doubt – a woman sparring with two men in the process of selecting one for the night's finale, and wondering if she'd chosen right.

We were not combined. We were adulterated. I was available, nonchalant, and to tell the truth most of the time bored. One night, when we went out for dinner together, she became upset by droning on and on about the fundamentalist disapproval her husband's parents had for alcohol. She was pompous in her disapproval, and I tried to ignore it. But she kept it up. 'Look,' I said, 'I don't know what to say. I don't know them. I wish I could help. But does going on about them to such lengths make it help?' I also felt immune. I honestly didn't care one way or the other the way things turned out between us. Whether she came or whether she didn't amounted to the same thing. And it made me bold. I often conveyed in a strained and unfair way what was wrong without being at all direct about what was right. But whatever was right was lost in the chill of a misadventure in which we were betraying two other people. She gave herself, as I say, less out of affection for me than anger at her husband, and I took from her out of that surety. There were times, nevertheless, when because of this her ordinary tones had the penetrating quality of two people quarreling, which implicated me in all she felt of him.

I often found her a decided burden instead of a fairy of delight. Her main fault derived mainly from a fundamental seriousness about herself that often led to a deadening blandness. She was extremely literal. And unimaginative. I began to pine for friends of years gone by, the understanding of experiences shared, or even a sign of wit. She asked nothing of my work, only of my situation. It seemed alone sufficient for her that I was unattached. And I resented that.

I also resented her constant questions about my life, which somehow gave me a certain personality, or, to put it another way, made one for her she presumed to understand. She could also be puzzlingly sarcastic. 'Where's your furniture? You know, like chairs?' 'Why don't you have a telephone?' 'And why are you always shutting off lights?' She didn't like my car – a battered twelve-year-old Triumph TR4-A without shocks – though her own was unpaid for! And all the while she showed this

tendency to feel she deserved to be taken care of. I noticed, for example, she preferred only upscale restaurants, ones with bowing waiters and leather-bound menus. She wouldn't expressly tell me that, it wasn't the form her delicacy took, but she would convey it in an arch way whenever that opportunity wasn't met by quiet disapproval or various oblique remarks. What didn't make her happy made her depressed. She often betrayed a forbidding listlessness and lack of enthusiasm for no reason, to the degree that I began seriously to wonder if she was well.

Farol was beautiful but, I thought, self-impaired. She was at times extremely unresponsive. It was an arrogance I thought an extreme form of shyness. I was wrong. I kept reminding myself, however, people aren't perfect; the only unfailing rule is, if they seem so, they can't be. She seemed tired and thirsty a lot and had an ill person's crankiness and need for attention. I began to wonder about diabetes. Always, there was that fixed and certain way with her, the earrings, the contact lenses, the glass of water within arm's reach on the bed table. We didn't make love. We called it that, but it was the kind of sex that in its unspoken division turned me into one broken half of a couple, her into the other.

Soon, the frequency of our questions dropped off. I did not wish to know her secrets. I was convinced she was in for a solitary life no matter where she went or what she did. As she had it, the world had used her ill. She had suffered. I saw she also suspected herself. She often repeated – I had no idea what she meant – 'I seem to do everything wrong.' But it seemed to me as she searched the bottom of her grief looking for some way to express it that she overemphasized her defects in order to feel sorry for herself, not so much to invite my sympathy as to avoid the feelings of guilt she sustained for sleeping with me. At least that's what I thought. But it turned out I was wrong, it wasn't guilt, it was only loss of face.

'I wouldn't be doing this,' she often repeated, 'if things were right with me and John.' It was always her remark sitting up after making love, wrists crossed, catching her breath with that quaver in her voice, a tremor touched with a small vibration of frailty and muffled anguish. She'd get up, pull on the mannish trousers she always wore – I came to see why, for she was markedly saber-shinned, her calves as fleshless as the joint of a cane – and then go to bathroom to bathe from her face the incriminating traces of my aftershave lotion.

'Do you know that?' she'd ask. 'You know that, don't you?' I would nod, anything for agreement. And then she'd be gone, driving off into the darkness that always exacerbated for the two of us, whenever we dared think of it, more of penalty than peace.

And eventually Farol was driven to justify her actions. I listened to what one night she divulged of her husband and found it traitorous. She said he was overbearing and pompous and often didn't speak to her for weeks. I wasn't surprised when she told me he had already been married and divorced once before. She told me his first wife had ignored him. She complained he ignored her. Good old-fashioned unshapely

resentment surfaced everywhere. All the clichés were there. I thought it was almost funny. ‘John hates sex,’ she said. This wasn’t only tactless, or merely disloyal and vulgar – I didn’t believe it. I took it as a matter of course that the only sufficient real reason for a woman saying her husband hated sex was to seduce the man to whom she was telling it, a fact swiftly corroborated in this instance when in the very next breath Farol, immune to paradox, told me he was also clumsy and awkward. She meant, of course, *in making love*.

‘He used to keep a watch by the side of the bed,’ she added scornfully – ‘I swear – and actually time himself when he did it.’ And whereas before she’d once or twice mentioned divorce, she now did so more frequently.

But as I was not in love with her I asked little of what I preferred not to know. Upon strict reflection I felt I would not have willingly had it otherwise. Her world was eye-level and down. And as she was troubled there would be no answer to any question I might have asked that wouldn’t lead back, I knew, to the thousand depressing irrelevancies by which she rationalized her visits and upon which our random acquaintance was so tenuously based. There were no rules. Not a rule. I had none to go by, and neither had she.

It wasn’t a romance. It was a relationship. Sleeping together – it’s blackly comic, I suppose – creates entanglements. It leads to obligations by not talking and often perversely fosters an alliance that should be the result of clarification, not the cause of it. But because we could hardly imagine a future, time stood still, giving us over to an unreality which because of the stark consequences neither of us ever spoke of, and so always did, left us a legacy wherein magic was displaced by method and fantasy by fact.

Strangeness we accepted; familiarity we refused. It was as if mortality itself, a feeble mimicry aspiring to what it shouldn’t, could only be known by what it couldn’t have of the immortal, leaving us both in a dreadful stasis that had to ignore in terms of hope deferred what could only be accepted as despair. And that was something I didn’t need.

I’d been there before.

3

I had moved up to New Hampshire several years before. There was never any real reason to stay there. I had no ties nor those inner family relations which are hardly possible between those other than parents and children, husbands and wives. I've often discussed with myself the necessity of such bonds for a person's happiness, and although I'd once generally satisfied myself with the answer that there wasn't a need, I found I was wrong.

I was brought up in Boston. I never knew my parents. My mother died when I was born. The Fords, if they were finally without luck, were not without talent. Many of them had been prominent writers. My great-grandfather's younger brother, my great-uncle, discovered the magnetic monopole at MIT in 1902. Neither were they without public spirit. My father, a polar explorer, was descended from prominent members of society who inherited, and in due course bequeathed, substantial amounts of capital to various academies and institutes, one among them, ironically enough, the very orphanage to which we ourselves soon had to be sent, for although he'd married again – I have a half brother and a half sister – he went down in a plane crash over Antarctica three years later, or so I was told.

A child at the time, I was dimly and undefinably witness to this dark beginning. The crisis of being suddenly uprooted proved neither broad nor slow for me. A fatal suspicion already existed in my mind that nothing really lasted.

There are memories both sad and dear of those early years. The institution in which I found myself – and whose name rather quaintly referred to a century gone by – was called the Home for Little Wanderers. We walked in file. There was chapel. We were the victims of strict ordinance and were punished for leaving lights on and wasting water and not making our beds. And along with schoolwork, various jobs were assigned us: buffing floors, washing dishes, shaking down ashes in the coal room. The rest of our leisure went unchallenged. I remember on Sundays, all of us being herded together and wearing name tags on coats of uniform manufacture, being taken on supervised trips to the Arboretum and the Forsyth Dental Clinic and the Children's Museum and other places of historical interest.

But my loneliness was extreme. That I always kept to myself still further checked my acquaintances; in fact, it took some time before I actually learned that Tarquin was my brother. (My sister, Daisy, I came to know only later, by letters.) I often wanted to confide in them, to share my distress, but I couldn't. It wasn't that they were younger, merely that I was apprehensive. I feared the very nature of coming close to them meant they'd be taken away.

If I had been clever, I should doubtless have attracted the jealousy of my fellows, but I was spared this by the mediocrity of my performance in classes as in everything