

PERSONAL HISTORY

NAKED ON THE GRASS

The author recalls his mother's deathbed confession.

BY JAY MCINERNEY

MOST love stories, like most fortunes, begin with a crime. It's been years since I heard one that involved only two people, and I've come to think of betrayal as a corollary of bliss. When my mother, on her deathbed, told me her own secret love story, my wife had just left me for another man, and my father was sleeping in the next room. My mother was known as a giver, a doer of good works. A center for children is named after her. Her priest still refers to her in his sermons. I think that, by confessing her sin to me, she hoped to reverse the process of canonization and become more fallibly human in death than she had seemed while she was among us. She was tired of being a saint.

After years of trying not to think about her, I now find it difficult to conjure up my mother in all her vivacity. I locate her indirectly: through a smell or a sensation—the premonitory prickle of chill on my bare arms on a late-summer night. For her sake, I hope the afterlife takes place outdoors. She loved dogs, woods, snow, long stretches of blue water stippled with whitecaps, practical jokes, and picnics. She disliked gum chewers, hunters, self-promoters, cosmetics, public displays of affection, and dark, airless rooms. “It’s such a nice day,” she would tell us. “Why don’t you go outside and play?” It became a ditty that my brother Chris and I would repeat in mockery: “Such a nice day, go out and play.”

I was a mama’s boy for the first twelve or thirteen years of my life. There was no one whose company I preferred to hers, and we tended to rely on each other for companionship—my father was always at the office or on a plane to Pittsburgh or Cleveland. In the winter, I was sometimes allowed to skip school to go skiing with my mother. In the spring and fall, it was

sailing. This was when our unspoken conspiracy against my father started: no need to let him in on our little secret—he might not understand, she implied. And together we persuaded him not to send me off to prep school—a fate that befell both of my younger brothers, Chris and Mark.

MY mother was a firstborn, like me. She was the bright, fair-haired daughter of parents who had left the Irish Catholic ghetto of South Boston for the Wasp nest of Newton. Valedictorian of her class, captain of the field-hockey team, and president of the ski club, she went on to Middlebury College, where she was elected president of the student union. (It must have been discouraging to follow such an act; her younger, darker sister specialized in truancy, makeup, and cigarettes and eloped at eighteen with a high-school dropout who later made a fortune selling Subarus.)

My mother was a tomboy who grew up playing baseball, and it was only natural that her given name, Marilyn, was more or less dropped in favor of the boyish Merf, from Murphy, her last name. Tall, blond, and less voluptuous than the ideal of her day, she possessed the kind of wholesome beauty that reminded many—until she opened her mouth to sing—of Doris Day. She liked her body because it was athletic, but she had very little consciousness of her sexual currency, and little interest in enhancing it. She was prudish even by the standards of the time, and I doubt that the men who courted my mother fantasized about her wearing black lingerie or talking dirty, but quite a few imagined her as a wife.

“I feel gypped,” she told me the night before she died, curling her fingers into a pitifully weakened fist. “Girls weren’t supposed to like sex. And, God

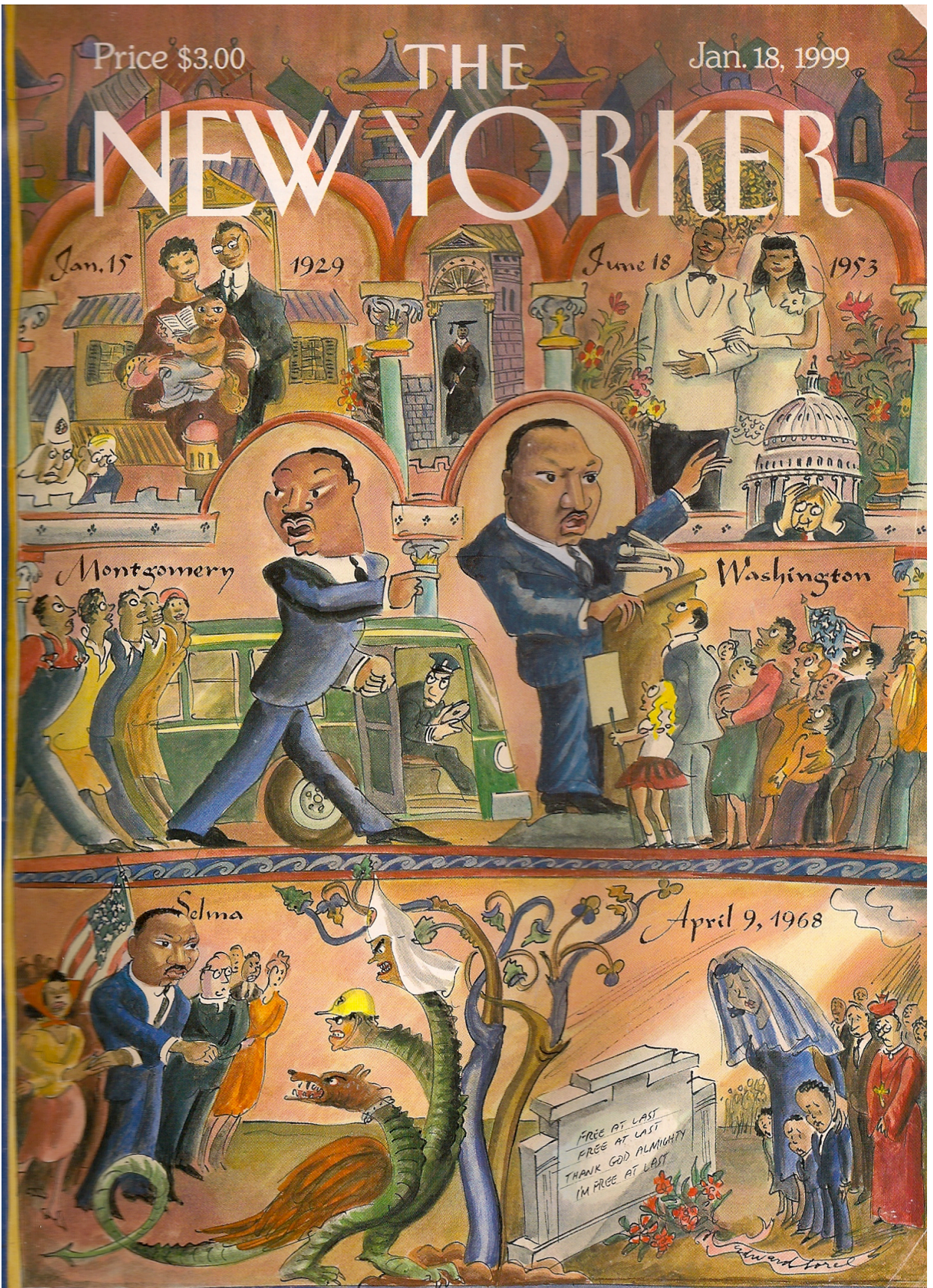


It was the seventies. Nixon was

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MARTHA ROSLER, "SUBWAY STATION, FRANKFURT" (1983)/GORNEY BRAVIN AND LEE

going down. Saigon was falling. Marriages were cracking up. Everywhere my mother looked, the message was "Go for it."

knows, I didn't. I loved your father and I wanted to make him happy, but I was doing it, you know, for him. I just gritted my teeth the first night. It was years before I started to enjoy it. And then it was almost too late." "Almost" turned out to be the significant word.

I didn't know what to make of these confessions. I was astonished and, at first, embarrassed. My mother and I had never talked about sex. But modesty was not a luxury available to her now. I had just carried her back from the bathroom, where I had lifted her nightgown up over her hips for her. Now, at the end, her old inhibitions seemed ridiculous to her.

"You're so lucky," she said, "being a boy and growing up when you did. They really screwed us up back then. God-damned son of a bitch!" My mother had only recently started swearing—since she had become ill, really—and she wasn't very good at it. Her rhythm was off. She was like someone with a mild case of Tourette's, but the anger was genuine.

MY father was also a Catholic, although he could have passed for a Wasp. Like my mother's father, my paternal grandfather had prospered and suburbanized his South Boston Irish family, and my father had grown

up five miles from Merf, though they didn't meet until both had finished college.

He was the handsomest man she had ever seen—almost too handsome. Like his elegant banker father, he had a touch of the dandy: he was known to wear spectator shoes in summer and red vests in winter. He had a slightly remote, abstracted air that I have observed in other flawlessly handsome men. You often got the sense that he wasn't quite there in the room with you.

For four weeks after they met, on a blind date, he called her every Thursday night, by which time she was long since booked for the weekend. Three other young men were competing for her attention, and two had already proposed. She fended them off, waiting for my father to phone. Finally, she held a weekend open for him. A few weeks later, he proposed.

Within days of my parents' engagement, Scott Paper, the company my father was working for, transferred him to Hartford, and that's where I was born, ten months after the wedding. Less than a year later, he was transferred to Manchester, New Hampshire, and then to London, England, and so on. It became a pattern.

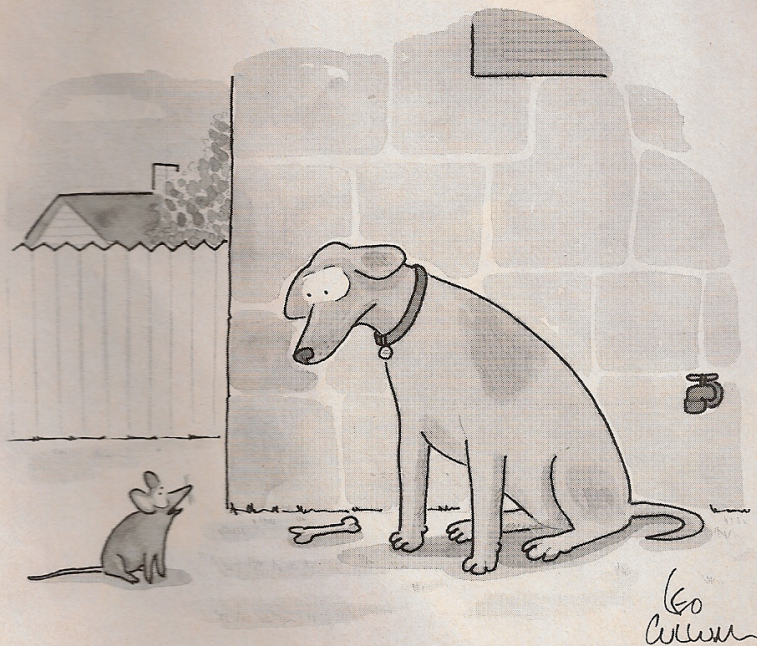
In 1969, when I was in the ninth

grade, we moved from Vancouver to a town I'll call Buxton, Massachusetts—my tenth such move in fourteen years. (The names here—apart from the members of my family—have been changed.) I think my mother was nearly as sick of it as my brother Chris and I were—leaving old friends, making new ones. Asserting herself, she rejected the house that my father had selected for us in town and found instead a rambling lakeside Tudor in the thin suburban belt just beyond the small city. At least there she would have the consolation of sailing and water-skiing in the back yard.

BUXTON, originally a mill town, depended by then on a giant General Electric plant to employ many of its blue-collar inhabitants and replenish its country-club set with transferred executives. We arrived in town shortly before a series of layoffs started, and I watched the town shrink as I grew up, the jobs moving south or overseas. But there were no portents of decline when my parents first met Wick and Charlotte Millbrook, the most glamorous couple in town. My parents were attractive and widely travelled, and the Millbrooks saw them, it occurs to me now, as the urbane companions they deserved. Both couples had children close in age, and within a year we were celebrating Christmas and Easter together.

Wick's forebears had been among the founding families of Buxton. Wick had met Charlotte, then a student at Simmons College, on a blind date, when he was still studying law at Harvard. A refugee from a Midwestern Catholic family, Charlotte slouched to minimize her height—almost six feet in her flats. Her nervous, angular "Walk Like an Egyptian" way of moving barely disguised her towering beauty. Wick was six-five, Charlotte's ideal dance partner, although no one ever doubted her when she said that she'd had to lead during their first waltz. Wick's mother, I eventually learned, had been fierce and dominating, so Charlotte's authoritarian aspect must have seemed comfortably familiar.

After graduation, they got married, at the Williams College chapel. They bought a Greek Revival mansion nearby, and restored it with scrupulous



"Remember, the enemy of your enemy is your friend."

fidelity. Wick was taken on by a local law firm, and Charlotte threw herself into the social life of the community. She was now rich, by her standards and by those of Buxton, and seemed driven to take advantage of the many opportunities previously denied her.

By the time we arrived, the Millbrooks' Christmas parties had become legendary for their extravagance—there was one on Christmas Eve, which included the children, with puppet shows or magicians, as well as a brunch the next day. Charlotte started planning weeks in advance and was often exhausted for days afterward. Delicacies were conjured from distant cities, and many of the elaborate ornaments and wreaths were handcrafted by the hostess. Every year, there were more Spode Christmas-tree plates—dozens and dozens—unshelved for this one occasion. The napkins were linen, the flatware was sterling, the liquor was top-shelf: Chivas, Bombay, and Stolichnaya. Wick would make pitchers of his famous deadly milk punch. This at a time when a plate of Ritz crackers with Cracker Barrel cheese constituted a fête.

It was at the Millbrooks' house that I saw my first Brie—the thin end of a wedge of sophistication which eventually replaced Scotch-and-soda with white-wine spritzers, iceberg lettuce with romaine, and Thousand Island dressing with vinaigrette. We all followed the Millbrooks down this road: by 1972 cheddar was practically extinct in our part of the world. But the cheese was still served before rather than after dinner, even at the Millbrooks', and their Continental habit of serving the salad after the main course never caught on. Is it my imagination or did extramarital sex arrive at about the same time as the Brie? The first divorce in this circle was roughly contemporary with the new *fromage*.

Buxton was no more provincial than most American communities; thirty years ago, the Millbrooks would



"The Goose That Lays the Golden Eggs is proud to announce she's now laying two additional lines of eggs: Silver and Platinum."

have seemed dazzlingly cosmopolitan almost anywhere outside New York. All the towns we'd lived in, during those years, formed a kind of continuous postwar suburb, with brand-new "Colonial" houses where World Book Encyclopedias dominated bookshelves and pretty seascapes of Provincetown hung above sofas—that lost world of tuna casseroles and bridge clubs and whiskey sours, Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass playing on the commode-style cherry-veneer stereo and Lawrence Welk on the rabbit-eared TV.

The Millbrooks had more books than I'd ever seen, overflowing their shelves and spilling out onto tabletops, real books—poetry and history and art books the size of TV trays. They collected art: late Abstract Expressionists, Rauschenberg, and Jim Dine. There was a painting that I thought was a Picasso oil study for "Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe," after Manet's famous painting. In this rendition, unlike the Manet original, there was effectively only one couple, and the man, too, was nude. I

remember being thrilled and appalled by the nudity, trying to interpret the interaction between the two primary figures. Were they about to have sex? Had they just had sex? Until I saw Manet's original, I didn't know about the missing male figure. I've since learned that the painting wasn't a Picasso, and it's possible that this memory was constructed after the fact—that I superimposed a painting I encountered later in life onto the story of my mother's first illicit tryst, which was also a picnic on the grass. In any case, the so-called dirty pictures on the Millbrooks' walls were a source of consternation in some quarters. But I knew better, and the Millbrooks did as much as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones to shape my growing scorn for my middle-class upbringing.

"I've just met five women who introduced themselves as your mother's best friend." My third wife, Helen, was at her first Buxton cocktail party. My mother, whom she'd never met, had been dead for twelve years. "And they

all used the word 'saint' to describe her."

"Now you see what I mean," I said. Merf was not a politician, but she had a quality of perfect sympathy. She also had a gift for interrogation, for getting everyone's life story—with the result that any number of people walked out of our house a little taller, as if they were about to become the subjects of biographies. Naturally, they came back.

No one was so fierce in claiming my mother's friendship as Charlotte. Like most interesting friendships, theirs seemed unlikely. They looked enough alike to be sisters—tall, rangy, and Hibernian. Even more so after Charlotte started dressing my mother and advising her on her coiffure. My mother, who was six or seven years older than Charlotte, willingly played the younger sister, indulging Charlotte's need to dominate, because she recognized the larger neediness behind it. Charlotte never tired of trying to interest Merf in cooking, English furniture, and American painting, but in the end she was probably surprised and grateful to discover that Merf could love her without these things.

Also, Charlotte needed someone to talk to. She was always complaining about Wick—about his absent-mindedness, his passivity, his inability to make money fast enough. I can't imagine Merf responding in kind—she would have considered it disloyal and self-indulgent—although her marriage was less perfect than everyone assumed. In the mid-seventies, when even Buxtonites were signing up for est, my mother retained an old-fashioned view of privacy. And, at some point, candor became impossible for my mother, because she was falling in love with Charlotte's husband.

It was something of a joke around town that if you needed to find my mother at a cocktail party you simply had to look for Wick's head, towering above the crowd and beaming like a lighthouse. He was so obvious about his affection for her that it seemed almost ridiculous to think that anything *sub rosa* could be going on. Not that there was much doubt about the state of the Millbrooks' marriage. One morning, I woke to hear that they'd had a fight in our living room the night before. Charlotte had driven off in the car, and Wick had insisted on walking

A HYPERBOREAN

Ruined temples. Poetry. Zbigniew Herbert,
The inside of your head was a littered Delphi
Where satellites and eagles sailed in orbit
Above the god's besieged hill sanctuary
And the oracle was the one thing still uncensored,
The *via sacra* a *via crucis* partly
And partly actual stone, the untransfigured
Hill itself. You were a Hyperborean,
One of those at the back of the north wind
Whom Apollo favored and kept going back to
In the winter season. And among your people you
Remained his herald whenever he'd departed
And the land was silent and summer's promise thwarted.
You learned the lyre from him and kept it tuned.

—SEAMUS HEANEY

the eight miles home in his tasselled loafers, although it was well below freezing and the ground was covered with snow. My father drove along beside him for half a mile, trying to persuade him to get in the car. But Wick wanted to prove a point.

I was flattered when Wick started to take an interest in me. He was a great reader, and he began to lend me volumes from his library. We talked about poetry and about colleges. And, unlike my father, with whom I argued violently about Vietnam and Watergate, he was a McGovern Democrat, a patrician liberal.

"Does he talk to you?" Charlotte would ask me, shrilly, as Wick grinned at the other end of the table. "He doesn't talk to me. It's like living with a damn statue."

"Say something!" she would challenge him, in front of a group. To which he would inevitably answer, "What do you want me to say?"

"Do you see what I live with?" she'd ask. We saw. We were all on Wick's side—my parents, his kids. We thought Wick had a fiendishly clever strategy for living with the garrulous and demanding Charlotte, the real genius of it being that Charlotte could never be quite sure whether it was a strategy or a personality. There seemed to me something noble in Wick's passivity. He was a man of few words, but he could be communicative when he chose to be. Which is apparently how he

won my mother. For once, the listener had found someone to listen to her.

"HE used to read to me," my mother told me the night before she died. It was time for the morphine, but she wanted to talk. "We'd take a picnic basket and drive to Mt. Greylock, and spread a blanket on the grass." Very crafty of Wick, I thought: for Merf, the big drawback of reading had always been that it was an indoor activity. "And he'd talk to me. I think that was what really got to me. It had been so long since someone had asked me what I was thinking, what dreams I still had for my life. Your . . ." She hesitated, not wanting to name the injured party. "It had been so long since your father had talked to me."

She talked to Wick about her wavering faith. She was having a harder and harder time accepting the Catholic teachings on the role of women. One imagines Wick, a casual Episcopalian and a suitor, encouraging her skepticism. Among the poets he chose to read on those outings were the champions of *carpe diem*—Herrick and Marvell and Omar Khayyám.

A lifetime's prudishness isn't shed overnight. When I was fourteen, Merf discovered a hard-core novel under my bed called "Memoirs of a Whoremaster"—a graphic and gratifyingly encyclopedic account of the range of human sexual behavior. And what a range it was! There was virtually no filler—

no tedious narrative preliminaries or romantic filigree to interfere with the business of stroking, sucking, and fucking.

I can't remember her ever being quite so angry at me. I could tell the moment I arrived home from school. Her responses to my delicate inquiries about her day were clipped and brittle. Finally, she said, "Read any good books lately?" (Sarcasm was not her mode.) She took the paperback out of a drawer in the kitchen—Exhibit A—and held it up by a corner, as if it carried a disease. I was mortified. It was a filthy book and I was appalled to think of my mother reading it, and especially to think about her thinking about me reading it. But I was also taken aback by the depth of her anger. Her later discovery of a bag of pot in the pocket of my jeans, ugly though that was, was nothing by comparison. It was as if I'd betrayed her personally. She could hardly look at me for days. Normally, it was my father's wrath I feared—he represented the law of the land, riding in from time to time like a circuit judge; my mother was like one of those hip teachers who identify with the students more than with the administration. Obviously, she had trouble accepting the nascent sexuality of her firstborn, but later I wondered if the vehemence of her reaction reflected guilt over her own illicit behavior.

"Memoirs of a Whoremaster" was theory; Courtney Bates was practice. Courtney was a family friend of the Millbrooks, who had come up from Florida in the summer of '71 to babysit for the children—Wick, Jr., who was ten, his eight-year-old sister, Jody, and their three-year-old brother, Tyler. Courtney was an older woman—sixteen to my fifteen. My mother approved of her because she was outdoorsy. My brothers and my friends approved of her because she was pretty and blond and she had a body that reminded us of the Raquel Welch poster from "One Million Years B.C.," which hung in my room at that time. Courtney seemed to me to be vastly worldly

without being stuck-up. She introduced me to Karlil Gibran and Ayn Rand and M. C. Escher, and she let it be known early in our friendship that she wasn't a virgin.

We were both looking at colleges the following summer, and a trip to Middlebury, my mother's alma mater, was approved, on the condition that I would stay with her great friend and classmate there, the director of admissions, who would interview us both the following day. After dinner with the director and his family, Courtney said good night and drove to the Middlebury Inn. I waited until the family seemed to be asleep and then sneaked off into the night, leaving a note to the effect that I had risen early and gone for a walk. I think that it had been my intention to sneak back in before daybreak, but in the ecstasy of what followed I lost track of the plan. My interview was scheduled for ten; I woke up in Courtney's room a few minutes after the hour, and arrived at the admissions office some forty minutes late, breathless, unshaven, hung over, and unburdened of my virginity. The interview was not a success.

The drive home with Courtney was subdued. I was worried about what I would say to my mother. Even before I had presented my version of events, she could read my sickly smile. The look she gave me made me doubt for the first time that her love for me was infinitely elastic.

It was impossible for me to imagine, of course, that, at the same time, my mother was undergoing an awakening of her own. Even though she wasn't reading Norman O. Brown and Germaine Greer, she was reading *Newsweek*, and she actually attended a women's consciousness-raising group. Nixon was going down. Saigon was falling. Marriages were cracking up. Everywhere my mother looked, the message was "Go for it."

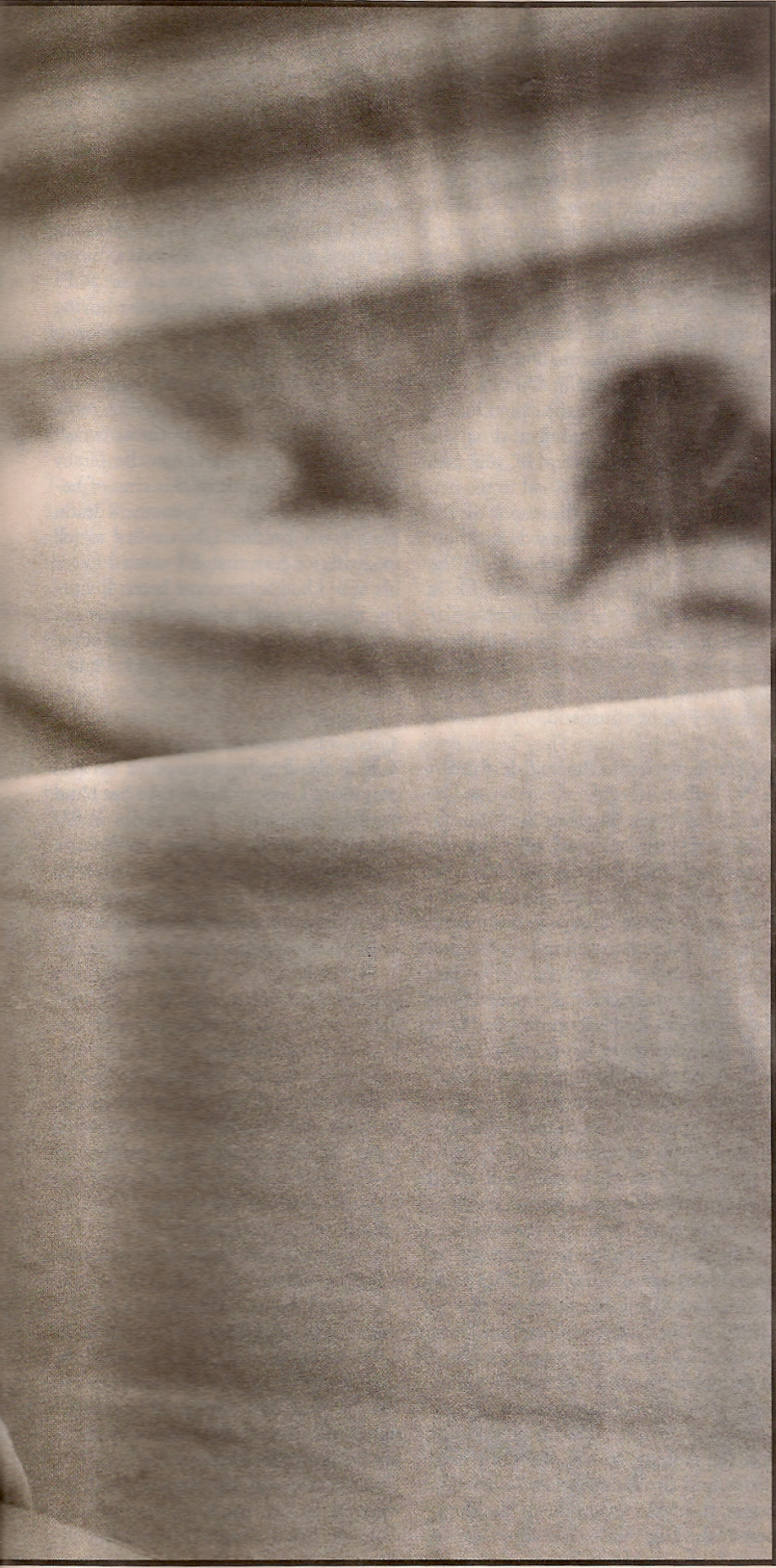
My father told me that she had cried for weeks after I went to college. Soon after that, she stepped up her work with abused children, who were apparently growing in numbers as G.E. cut back jobs and Buxton's economy continued to decline, and she enrolled in a series of courses in social work at U. Mass. It's hard for me to imagine her circulating in that world of poverty and vio-



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lence, but she had always been conscious of how lucky she was—noblesse oblige—and this work must have consoled her sometimes. At other times, though, I know she felt like a hypocrite, a sinner doing good.

IN the fall of 1973, my father had emergency heart-bypass surgery. My mother optimistically believed that the experience would change him. When he went back to Massachusetts General for a checkup a year later, though, he was working as hard as ever and he had developed a distant stare. Merf was with him, and among the questions the surgeon asked was whether their, ahem, conjugal relations were back to normal.

"All's well," my father answered. My mother didn't say anything, but something in her expression must have tipped off the surgeon, who told my father that there was absolutely no reason, in his case, to avoid sexual activity.

"I'm not suggesting you start swinging naked from the chandelier," he added.

"Understood," my father said.

"I didn't want to embarrass him," my mother told me, on her last night. The old forms and habits of modesty had been intact, although by that time, she said, she had outgrown her distaste for sex. Her timing was terrible, because my father, like many men who suffer cardiac trauma, either had lost his sexual vitality or was afraid to exercise it. Eventually, she consulted the parish priest, who counselled patience. Wick was patient. He'd been waiting for years.

FRESH LOOKS

The photographer François-Marie Banier, a contributor to these pages, balances intimate portraits of such well-known subjects as Vladimir Horowitz, Samuel Beckett, and Princess Caroline of Monaco with equally affecting shots of anonymous passersby, especially children, in the streets of Paris, New Delhi, Madrid, Kathmandu. His new book, "Private Heroes," is the catalogue for a travelling exhibition of the same name (now on view in Germany); it will be published here by Cantz / D.A.P. this summer.

"St. Petersburg, May, 1992"



And he had let her know that he would keep on waiting as long as need be.

One night, a couple of years after my father's operation, she and Wick danced together at a disco, improbably situated in the basement of a former mansion in Stockbridge. On the dance floor, she held his gaze long enough to show him that she loved him and was finally prepared to acknowledge it. That night, she could hardly sleep. Something had happened, was happening. My father was asleep beside her and she felt guilt, but she had made a decision, and the decision was palpably joyful. Once my father had left for work, she called Wick, her voice high and unnatural as she spoke with his secretary. He, too, had been unable to sleep. He had to see her.

Later, standing at the shore of the lake by our house, she sensed that there was a hidden order, a grid beneath the surface of things. Her love was like a decoder ring. It told her that the filaments of desire connected everything to something else. She felt a new affection for all living creatures, even—in fact, especially—for her husband.

NOT believing in illness, Merf didn't believe in regular checkups, and by the time she was diagnosed with cancer, in 1979, it was too far advanced for her to recover, although the doctors held out hope as she suffered through chemotherapy for more than a year—during which Charlotte drove her to a hospital in Boston every three weeks. The fact that she had no vices, that she had been the poster girl for clean living, made her illness all the more inexplicable. Later we learned that although General Electric had essentially abandoned the city, it had left plenty of megatoxic PCBs behind. My father ended his days convinced that industrial waste had killed his wife, but my mother had an unscientific explanation for her cancer: sin.

She tried to shield me, not letting on how ill she was when I called her from Japan, where I was living then. But I returned to the States sooner than I had planned, and took up residence in New York, making the three-hour trip to Buxton—how often? Not often enough, in retrospect. Mom's condition aside, it was depressing to see the shuttered stores and broken windows on Main Street, the defeated shuffle of the shoppers at the Big Y.

I got married, for the first time, on the lawn at home, the date carefully chosen to fall between my mother's debilitating chemo treatments. When my wife left me, four months after the wedding, I went on a long anesthetic binge. Although my mother's illness was ultimately a far greater source of pain to me than the loss of my wife, I tried to shield Merf from the sight of what I romantically imagined to be my own disintegration. She was dying and I was dabbling at killing myself—buying cocaine by the ounce and selling enough to break even, staying awake for days at a time. At one point, a friend dragged me out of the city—they call it an "intervention" now—and I tried to throw myself from the moving car onto the Jersey Turnpike. As a result of this kind of behavior, I nearly missed my mother's death. Finally, my brother Chris called to tell me, with icy fury, that if I wanted to see her alive I had better come home. Relieving my exhausted father and brothers, I stayed with her through the last three nights of her life. Most of what I know about her I learned in those hours.

SHE was almost unrecognizably wasted in the fragile envelope of her papery skin. I was afraid to take her hand for fear the bones of her wrist would break through. But within a few hours I had become accustomed to the awful rituals of deathbed nursing: injecting her with morphine, carrying her to the toilet, putting ice cubes in her mouth.

"Promise me you won't tell me I'm going to get better," she said, the first night, as soon as we were alone. My father and my brothers hadn't quite accepted the fact that she was dying. She wanted her condition acknowledged; she felt that there ought to be some rights appertaining to dying—like candor.

We talked about my failed marriage. She startled me by saying, "I never thought she was right for you."

"Why the hell didn't you say something?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I knew I wasn't going to be around, and I guess I didn't want you to be alone. I didn't really raise you to take care of yourself. Maybe that was wrong of me, but I didn't want you to have to worry about the boring little details of life."

And who's to say that my mother wanted to see me with the perfect woman? I had always believed the cli-

ché—that a mother's love is selfless—but maybe there was something selfish in her love after all, something possessive and competitive. It makes me curiously happy to think so. I remember an oddly carnal atmosphere in the sickroom that night. She suddenly asked me when I had lost my virginity, and the timing could hardly have been accidental: I'd just changed her nightgown.

"What did you say?"

"You heard me. When did you first do it?"

"Jesus Christ, Mom." Out of habit, I almost apologized for taking the Lord's name in vain, but she had stopped chiding me for it.

"Come on," she said. "I'm dying. There are so many things I want to know." She smiled, to show me that the subject was no longer dangerous—but the smile was frightening, a grimace that stretched her cracked blue lips. I dipped a sponge into a big Pyrex bowl beside her bed and moistened them.

"I thought you knew. It was Courtney Bates."

"I thought so," she said. "Tell me about it." She squirmed upward on the stack of pillows propped behind her head, trying to get better elevation. "Who started it? Did she have an orgasm? Was it wonderful?"

"It was great," I said. "That's all you're getting."

"I'm glad," she said. "That must have been neat, starting off with a good experience."

"Yeah, well, you weren't so happy about it at the time."

"No, I wasn't. I was furious."

"So you knew."

"I knew. God, did I know!" She sighed. "What a waste! All the shame, the embarrassment, the guilt. The jealousy, even. All those things they made me feel. It just makes me so damn mad." Her pale face was glowing with anger, the blue veins pulsing beneath her skin. "Did she give you oral sex?"

"Mother, please."

"Come on," she said. "We don't have time for modesty. I mean, what the hell are we waiting for?"

"O.K.," I said. "She did."

"Do you like that?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact."

"How about Gina Grimaldi? Did you sleep with her?"

"Nope."

"No? I could have sworn she was loose."

"So that was why you didn't like her."

"I thought she was putting out for you."

"Putting out?"

"Isn't that the expression?"

It was simple. My mother liked the girls who she thought wouldn't put out for me. She'd guessed wrong on a few of them. "What about Kathleen Quigley?"

"I treated her," I said, "like the good Catholic girl I thought her to be, till I found out she was doing half of the guys in my class. I was crushed. I brooded for a week. Then I invited her out on a date and nailed her."

"I always thought," my mother said cheerfully, "that she was a tramp."

THE three nights blur together now. But it was on the very last night, when I relieved my father for the night shift, that he said to her, in parting, "You don't deserve this—you, of all people." Those were probably the last words of his that she heard.

"God, I hate it when he says that," she complained after he left. "He's the good one. I can't even tell him I've lost my faith, and it makes dying so terrible and lonely."

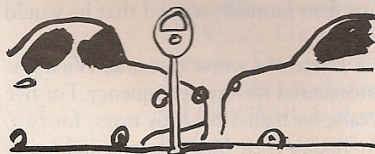
I held her hand, not knowing what to say except "I'm here." It seemed like poor economy to have to deal with the bullshit of Catholicism most of your life and then be unable to collect some righteous peace of mind at the end. A few minutes later, she drifted off into a terrible dream. She scratched and struggled against me. I held her down to the bed, calling out to her, trying to break through. Finally, she was back in the room with me.

"I'm so afraid," she said, searching for help in my eyes.

"You have less reason to be afraid than anyone I know," I said, encouragingly. She knew exactly what I meant: her saintliness.

"Don't say that," she snapped. "I'm so tired of everyone telling me how I don't deserve this. Especially your father. It makes it so much harder. I've done a terrible thing."

She started to tell me how lonely



she had been since my father's operation, how difficult it had been to talk to him at the best of times. "I began to feel like I didn't exist. Like I was just the maid and the innkeeper. First you went to college and then Chris and Mark. And I was so alone."

I knew what was coming. I felt that it should bother me or shock me, but it didn't.

Finally she mentioned him by name. The confession was anticlimactic. She talked about the picnic on Mt. Greylock—the *déjeuner sur l'herbe*. She mentioned a stolen day they had spent skiing together in Vermont. If there were any afternoons in roadside motels I didn't hear about them. She never actually told me in so many words that she had had sex with Wick—so, years later, I was able to equivocate with my father and suggest that all I knew for certain was that she had found companionship and poetry with him. But what she told me, unequivocally, was that she had found love.

Given that my wife had just run off with an Italian fashion photographer, it might seem to follow that I'd take my father's side. But, for some reason, I felt complicit with my mother and Wick out there with their picnic basket.

"Do you hate me?" she asked.

"I'm happy for you," I said, and it felt as if I meant it.

She seemed astonished. But I was pleased that she had decided to confide in me. Even if I hadn't approved, I think I would have pretended. Absolution was the only thing I could give her then. It was extraordinary to have to reimagine my own mother after more than twenty years.

Three psychiatrists have tried to convince me that my feelings must have been more complicated than I have admitted. After all, something messed me up enough to make me seek counsel on their couches, to burn through two marriages and half a dozen girlfriends and tens of thousands of dollars' worth of narcotics. "Maybe I just miss her," I said to one psychiatrist, a plumpish young woman, who, in a classic case of transference, was the object of some filthy fantasies on my part. It had already occurred to me, years before, that I probably saw Wick as my proxy in the Oedipal drama.

For my mother's last few hours, be-

fore the sun came up, she oscillated between relief and guilt. She was sorry that she had betrayed my father, who, in the end, throughout her illness, had been everything she could have hoped for. But she had known love a second time in her life, and it had to be spoken. She wanted to believe that love might not be such a terrible sin, but she was terrified that she had taken the wrong side of Pascal's wager—that the priests were right about God and his rules. I was sick to think that she had to struggle against her own conscience as well as the disease.

Dawn. She looked calm. She drifted away again; her eyes clouded over and her face was serene. After some time, she squeezed my hand.

"I was in a wonderful place," she said. She described a landscape that was characterized mainly by brilliant light. "My father was there, and someone else," she said. "The light seemed to be coming from him." She drifted off, then said, "They're waiting for me." I have since read many descriptions of near-death experiences, but I'd never heard of such a thing then. I wish I could say that, like St. Paul when he fell from his horse, I was forever altered. But I wasn't. I do think, though, that my mother found peace at the end.

My father relieved me shortly after dawn. I don't remember how I felt with my new knowledge. In fact, I don't remember him relieving me. The next thing I knew, I was being shaken out of a deep sleep. I went into the bedroom. I thought for a minute that she was already dead: her eyes were glazed and her head drooping on my father's shoulder, so drained of vitality that it was impossible to imagine any further diminution. But then I saw a flutter, a sudden dimming of the eyes.

She was forty-nine years old and I was twenty-four.

WE muddled on—diminished, heartbroken, and angry, for the next few years—my father, my brothers, Wick and Charlotte, and I. I don't remember anything about the funeral, although I'm told that I spoke at it. Three whole days are a blank for me

except for two incidents: I remember that, on the night of the funeral, I had sex with a member of my extended family on the sofa in the living room. And I remember that, at the wake, Wick sloped around like a bereft Gentle Ben, unable to claim the grieving rights of a lover.

The Millbrooks cancelled their Christmas Eve party that year. They came to our house instead, and our families continued to gather for the next few years. Our Christmas tree that first year had a crooked trunk, and Chris, Mark, and I hung only half the ornaments before we gave up. My father wept intermittently through the night, and we all became weary of the refrain "She was a saint." I ducked upstairs from time to time to do lines. My mother, it was now clear, had been the animating spirit of our Christmas gatherings. The carolling was the first ritual to go as the years passed, then midnight Mass. Finally, one year, long after we had expected the Millbrooks to arrive for cocktails, Wick, Jr., showed up alone, to apologize for his parents. "They're not feeling well," he said, rolling his eyes.

THE single and divorced women of Buxton went after my father one by one, and all bounced off like birds flying into a windowpane. He was happy to dine, and to dance, but he would inevitably begin to talk about my mother whenever intimacy loomed. I came to find something heroic in my father's mourning, though I didn't necessarily want to watch

him weep into his vodka. He had become softer, and far less judgmental, as if he had taken on Merf's role in our lives.

Wick, on those rare occasions when I saw him, was affectless. "Sometimes I think I'm living with a zombie," Charlotte told me one day. He was sinking into a depression. There was talk of the family's debt, and it soon became evident that the money was gone. He and his law firm mutually agreed that he would leave.

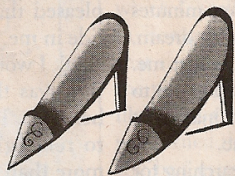
There was worse to come. Wick was prosecuted for tax delinquency. For five years, he hadn't paid his taxes; for two, he hadn't even filed. He pleaded guilty

and received a suspended prison sentence and two years of probation—a conviction that would normally result in the loss of the right to practice law. At his disciplinary hearing before the bar, there was a plea for leniency. He had since paid the taxes, and there were "mitigating circumstances": "A close personal friend" had "suffered from terminal cancer," and Wick was described as feeling "responsibility and guilt for the death." According to medical evidence, he had "attempted to expiate his feelings of guilt by failing to file his income tax returns, thus setting himself up to be caught and punished." "On the basis of these facts," Wick received only a public censure and was allowed to continue his legal career. The proceedings were reported in the local newspaper, in enough detail to make it clear to everyone that the friend in question was my mother.

The day after the article was published, my father appeared at my door in Syracuse, looking as if he had been in a fight, his face bruised, both eyes blackened. He had a Rose Mary Woods-style story about his car's having been rear-ended, but I don't think he really expected me to buy it. He slept on my couch for three days. I tried to offer what help I could. Seeing my father in torment, I was ashamed of myself for having taken Wick's part so easily. I had always thought of Wick as a stoic hero, but in his decline and fall he had lost some of his tragic stature. In the courtroom, he had, I felt, betrayed my mother, by using her death as his own defense.

My father felt humiliated and disgraced, but once the cuts and bruises of his mysterious accident had healed he showed more dignity than Wick. He took the blame on himself, concluding that he had failed Merf in some way. He naturally turned for sympathy to Charlotte, his fellow-victim, but after a few months she made it clear that she wanted nothing more to do with our family.

THE Millbrooks' Greek Revival house and its acreage were sold to a wealthy couple, who planned to use it as a weekend retreat from New York. The paintings and prints, the furniture, the silver, and the carpets went into storage. Wick opened a private prac-



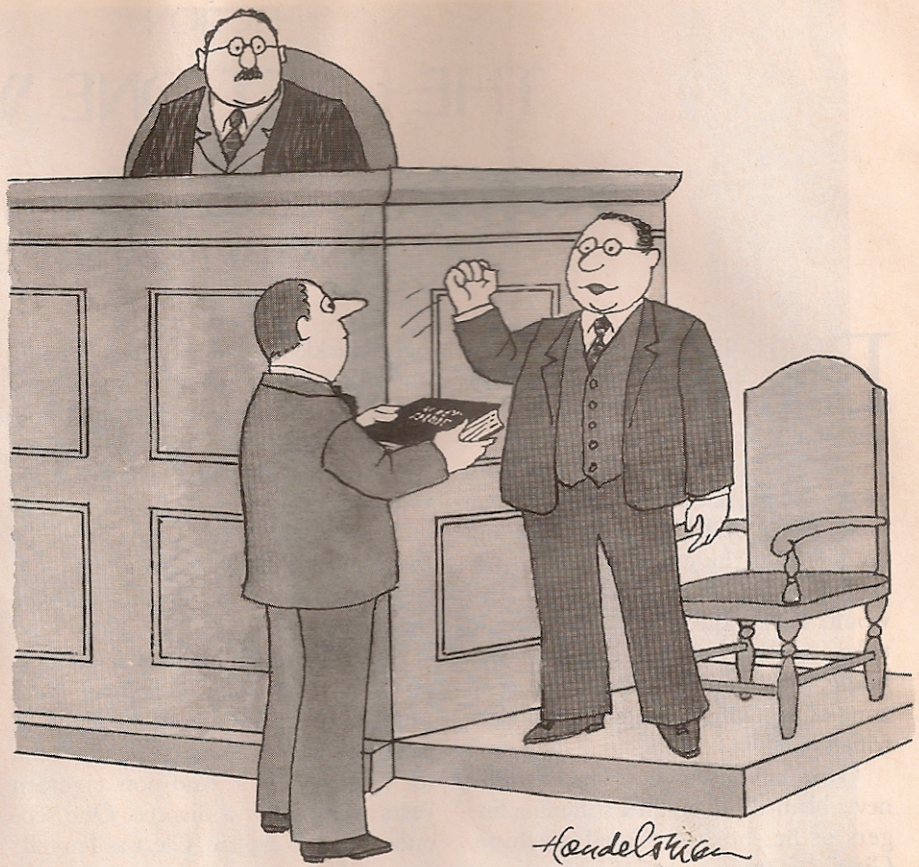
tice, sustained by local clients, whose loyalty tethered him to the environs of his notoriety.

My father died, alone in his bed, two years ago, at the age of sixty-nine. He had no warning, no time to reflect, but we all knew he was ready. "I'm just waiting to join her," he'd said many times. Chris tried to call Charlotte, thinking she might want to come to the funeral, but couldn't reach her. Wick, Jr., now a doctor, drove in from Boston for the service. Chris and I had a final drink with him that night after everyone had left the house. He told us that his sister, Jody, had joined an Evangelical Christian sect and that Charlotte was living alone and working for a museum in New York. "She's still bitter," he said patiently, like someone who has grown accustomed to explaining the behavior of his parents.

A YEAR and a half ago, I attended an engagement party on Park Avenue. I was a friend of the bride-to-be, and I didn't know the hosts, but I was struck by a painting I saw on the wall, an actual Picasso "Déjeuner sur l'Herbe." That night, for the first time in years, I dreamed about my mother. Three days later, I told my wife that I needed to drive up to Buxton one last time.

Not at all certain that Wick would take my call, I phoned his office from a rest stop on the Taconic Parkway. "This is a surprise," he said, without sounding the least bit surprised. He agreed to meet me for a drink at the bar of the former Hilton Hotel, which, he told me, had recently been acquired by a downmarket chain. Arriving early, I walked down Main Street. Three of the four cinemas were shuttered; the fourth was a senior citizens' center. The former Woolworth's store had been subdivided into flea-market stalls. The only shiny new enterprise in the vicinity was the center for children that was named for my mother. On its front steps, a black woman and a fat white woman smoked and glared at me as I paused on the sidewalk.

Wick was waiting at the bar. I was shocked at how little he had changed. His hair was now silver, but otherwise he was still boyish. We chatted awkwardly for a few minutes before I got to the point: "I guess I



"Mind if I thump it? I'm a Bible-thumper."

wanted to ask you about my mother."

He shrugged, as if he had expected this. Although he tried to help me, his answers only reminded me of how vague he had always seemed, and some old sense of decorum, of our former relations as adult and child, prevented me from really pressing him.

"She was a very special person," he said, "and I loved her deeply. It really wasn't very often that we managed to see each other alone."

"Do you think she would have left my father if she hadn't got sick?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I don't think she would have done that for anybody. The idea of family was too important to her."

I was surprised by the modesty of the observation. It seemed to diminish the scale of the affair. Somehow, I had imagined Wick's life ruined by my mother's death. That idea answered my sense of justice, both narrative and moral. But Wick had remarried years before. He seemed to

have reconciled himself to his past.

"Do you ever miss your other life—the house, the art, the antiques?" I was trying to pierce his composure.

"I'm actually much happier now," he said. He seemed to test this observation in his mind and to find it true. "Life is simpler." He leaned back in his chair. "What about you?"

I'd been waiting for an opportunity to tell him how well I was doing. But suddenly I was unable to summon enthusiasm for the tale of my accomplishments: the family, the big house, books I'd written, paintings I owned. Confronting the history we shared, I was stricken with a sense of vulnerability. I tried to imagine how Wick might have summed up his own existence a few years before it fell to pieces. I had a sudden vision of a smiling man standing at the edge of a cliff, wearing a blindfold.

I'd meant to tell Wick that I was successful and happy. But then I realized that my father, at my age, would have said the same thing. ♦