

The Humbling

Philip Roth

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The Humbling

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The teaching technique credited to Vincent Daniels
on page 34 is borrowed from *How to Stop Acting*
by Harold Guskin (Faber and Faber, 2003).

For J. T.

1. Into Thin Air

HE'D LOST HIS MAGIC. The impulse was spent. He'd never failed in the theater, everything he had done had been strong and successful, and then the terrible thing happened: he couldn't act. Going onstage became agony. Instead of the certainty that he was going to be wonderful, he knew he was going to fail. It happened three times in a row, and by the last time nobody was interested, nobody came. He couldn't get over to the audience. His talent was dead.

Of course, if you've had it, you always have something unlike anyone else's. I'll always be unlike anyone else, Axler told himself, because I am who I am. I carry that with me—that people will always remember. But the aura he'd had, all his mannerisms and eccentricities and personal peculiarities, what had worked for Falstaff and Peer Gynt and Vanya—what had gained Simon Axler his reputation as the last of the best of the classical American stage actors—none of it worked for any role now. All that had worked to make him himself now worked to make him look like a lunatic. He was conscious of every moment he was on the stage in the worst possible way. In the past when he was acting he wasn't thinking about anything. What he did well he did out of instinct. Now he was thinking about everything, and everything spontaneous and vital was killed—he tried to control it with thinking and instead he destroyed it. All right, Axler told himself, he had hit a bad period. Though he was already his sixties, maybe it would pass while he was still recognizably himself. He wouldn't be the first experienced actor to go through it. A lot of people did. I've done this before, he thought, so I'll find some way. I don't know how I'm going to get it this time, but I'll find it—this will pass.

It didn't pass. He couldn't act. The ways he could once rivet attention on the stage! And now he dreaded every performance, and dreaded it all day long. He spent the entire day thinking thoughts he'd never thought before a performance in his life: I won't make it, I won't be able to do it, I'm playing the wrong roles, I'm overreaching, I'm faking, I have no idea even of how to do the first line. And meanwhile he tried to occupy the hours doing a hundred seemingly necessary things to prepare: I have to look at this speech again, I have to rest, I have to exercise, I have to look at that speech again, and by the time he got to the theater he was exhausted. And dreading going out there. He would hear the cue coming closer and closer and know that he couldn't do it. He waited for the freedom to begin and the moment to become real, he waited to forget who he was and to become the person doing it, but instead he was standing there, completely empty, doing the kind of acting you do when you don't know what you are doing. He could not give and he could not withhold; he had no fluidity and he had no reserve. Acting became a night-after-night exercise in trying to get away with something.

It had started with people speaking to him. He couldn't have been more than three or four when he was already mesmerized by speaking and being spoken to. He had felt he was in a play from the outset. He could use intensity of listening, concentration, as lesser actors used fireworks. He had that power offstage, too, particularly, when younger, with women who did not realize that they had a story until he revealed to them that they had a story, a voice, and a style belonging to no other. They became actresses with Axler, they became the heroines of their own lives. Few stage actors could speak and be spoken to the way he could, yet he could do neither anymore. The sound that used to go into his ear felt as though it were going out, and every word he uttered seemed acted instead of spoken. The initial source in his acting was in what he heard, his response to what he heard was at the core of it, and if he couldn't listen, couldn't hear, he had nothing to go on.

He was asked to play Prospero and Macbeth at the Kennedy Center—it was hard to think of a

more ambitious double bill—and he failed appallingly in both, but especially as Macbeth. He couldn't do low-intensity Shakespeare and he couldn't do high-intensity Shakespeare—and he'd been doing Shakespeare all his life. His Macbeth was ludicrous and everyone who saw it said as much, and so did many who hadn't seen it. "No, they don't even have to have been there," he said, "to insult you." A lot of actors would have turned to drink to help themselves out; an old joke had it that there was an actor who would always drink before he went onstage, and when he was warned "You mustn't drink," he replied, "What, and go out there alone?" But Axler didn't drink, and so he collapsed instead. His breakdown was colossal.

The worst of it was that he saw through his breakdown the same way he could see through his acting. The suffering was excruciating and yet he doubted that it was genuine, which made it even worse. He did not know how he was going to get from one minute to the next, his mind felt as though it were melting, he was terrified to be alone, he could not sleep more than two or three hours a night, he scarcely ate, he thought every day of killing himself with the gun in the attic—a Remington 870 pump-action shotgun that he kept in the isolated farmhouse for self-defense—and still the whole thing seemed to be an act, a bad act. When you're playing the role of somebody coming apart, it has organization and order; when you're observing yourself coming apart, playing the role of your own demise, that's something else, something awash with terror and fear.

He could not convince himself he was mad any more than he'd been able to convince himself or anyone else he was Prospero or Macbeth. He was an artificial madman too. The only role available to him was the role of someone playing a role. A sane man playing an insane man. A stable man playing a broken man. A self-controlled man playing a man out of control. A man of solid achievement, of theatrical renown—a large, burly actor standing six feet four inches tall, with a big bald head and the strong, hairy body of a brawler, with a face that could convey so much, a decisive jaw and stern dark eyes and a sizable mouth he could twist every which way, and a low commanding voice emanating from deep down that always had a little growl in it, a man conscientiously on the grand scale who looked as if he could stand up to anything and easily fulfill all of a man's roles, the embodiment of invulnerable resistance who looked to have absorbed into his being the egoism of a dependable giant—playing an insignificant mite. He screamed aloud when he awakened in the night and found himself still locked inside the role of the man deprived of himself, his talent, and his place in the world, a loathsome man who was nothing more than the inventory of his defects. In the mornings he hid in bed for hours, but instead of hiding from the role he was merely playing the role. And when finally he got up, all he could think about was suicide, and not its simulation either. A man who wanted to live playing a man who wanted to die.

Meanwhile, Prospero's most famous words wouldn't let him be, perhaps because he'd so recently mangled them. They repeated themselves so regularly in his head that they soon became a hubbub of sounds tortuously empty of meaning and pointing at no reality yet carrying the force of a spell full of personal significance. "Our revels now are ended. These our actors, / As I foretold you, were all spirits and / Are melted into air, into thin air." He could do nothing to blot out "thin air," the two syllables that were chaotically repeated while he lay powerless in his bed in the morning and that had the aura of an obscure indictment even as they came to make less and less sense. His whole intricate personality was entirely at the mercy of "thin air."

VICTORIA, Axler's wife, could no longer care for him and by now needed tending herself. She would cry whenever she saw him at the kitchen table, his head in his hands, unable to eat the meal she had prepared. "Try something," she begged, but he ate nothing, said nothing, and soon Victoria began to panic. She had never seen him give way like this before, not even eight years earlier when his elderly parents had died in an automobile crash with his father at the wheel. He wept then and he went on. He always went on. He took the losses hard but the performance never faltered. And when Victoria was in turmoil, it was he who kept her tough and got her through. There was always a drug drama with her errant son. There was the permanent hardship of aging and the end of her career. So much disappointment, but he was there and so she could bear it. If only he were here now that the man on whom she had depended was gone!

In the 1950s, Victoria Powers had been Balanchine's youngest favorite. Then she hurt her knee, had an operation, danced again, hurt it again, had another operation, and by the time she was rehabilitated the second time round, someone else was Balanchine's youngest favorite. She never recovered her place. There was a marriage, the son, a divorce, a second marriage, a second divorce, and then she met and fell in love with Simon Axler, who, when he'd first come from college two decades earlier to make a career on the New York stage, used to go to the City Center to see her dance not because he loved ballet but because of his youthful susceptibility to the capacity she had to stir him to lust through the pathway of the tenderest emotions: she remained in his memory for years afterward as the very incarnation of erotic pathos. When they met as forty-year-olds in the late seventies, it was a long time since anyone had asked her to perform, though pluckily she went off every day to her workout at a local dance studio. She had done all she could to keep herself fit and looking youthful, but by then her pathos exceeded any ability she'd ever had to master it artistically.

After the Kennedy Center debacle and his unexpected collapse, Victoria fell apart and fled to California to be close to her son.

ALL AT ONCE Axler was alone in the house in the country and terrified of killing himself. Now there was nothing stopping him. Now he could go ahead and do what he'd found himself unable to do while she was still there: walk up the stairs to the attic, load the gun, put the barrel in his mouth, and reach down with his long arms to pull the trigger. The gun as the sequel to the wife. But once she'd left, he didn't make it through the first hour alone—didn't even go up the first flight of stairs toward the attic—before he had phoned his doctor and asked him to arrange for his admission to a psychiatric hospital that very day. Within only minutes the doctor had found him a place at Hammerton, a small hospital with a good reputation a few hours to the north.

He was there for twenty-six days. Once interviewed, unpacked, relieved of his "sharps" by a nurse, and his valuables taken to the business office for safekeeping, once alone and in the room assigned him, he sat down on the bed and remembered role after role that he had played with absolute assurance since he'd become a professional in his early twenties—what had destroyed his confidence now? What was he doing in this hospital room? A self-travesty had come into being who did not exist before, a self-travesty grounded in nothing, and he was that self-travesty, and how had it happened? Was it purely the passage of time bringing on decay and collapse? Was it a manifestation of aging? His appearance was still impressive. His aims as an actor had not changed nor had his painstaking

manner of preparation for a role. There was no one more thorough and studious and serious, no one who took better care of his talent or who better accommodated himself to the changing conditions of career in the theater over so many decades. To cease so precipitously being the actor he was—it was inexplicable, as though he'd been disarmed of the weight and substance of his professional existence one night while he slept. The ability to speak and be spoken to on a stage—that's what it came down to, and that's what was gone.

The psychiatrist he saw, Dr. Farr, questioned whether what had befallen him could truly be causeless, and in their twice-weekly sessions asked him to examine the circumstances of his life preceding the sudden onset of what the doctor described as "a universal nightmare." By this he meant that the actor's misfortune in the theater—going out on the stage and finding himself unable to perform, the shock of that loss—was the content of troubling dreams any number of people had about themselves, people who, unlike Simon Axler, were not professional actors. Going out on the stage and being unable to perform was among the stock set of dreams that most every patient reported at one time or another. That and walking naked down a busy city street or being unprepared for a crucial exam or falling off a cliff or finding on the highway that your brakes don't work. Dr. Farr asked Axler to talk about his marriage, about his parents' death, about his relations with his drug-addicted stepson, his boyhood, his adolescence, his beginnings as an actor, an older sister who had died of lupus when he was twenty. The doctor wanted to hear in particular detail about the weeks and months leading up to his appearance at the Kennedy Center and to know if he remembered anything out of the ordinary, large or small, occurring during that period. Axler worked hard to be truthful and thereby to reveal the origins of his condition—and with that to recover his powers—but as far as he could tell, no cause for the "universal nightmare" presented itself in anything he said sitting across from the sympathetic and attentive psychiatrist. And that made it all the more a nightmare. Yet he talked to the doctor anyway, each time he showed up. Why not? At a certain stage of misery, you'll try anything to explain what's going on with you, even if you know it doesn't explain a thing and it's one failed explanation after another.

Some twenty days into his stay at the hospital a night came when, instead of waking at two or three and lying sleepless in the midst of his terror till dawn, he slept right through until eight in the morning, so late by hospital standards that a nurse had to come to his room to awaken him so that he could join the other patients for 7:45 breakfast in the dining hall and then begin the day, which included group therapy, art therapy, a consultation with Dr. Farr, and a session with the physical therapist, who was doing her best to treat his perennial spinal pain. Every waking hour was filled with activities and appointments to prevent the patients from retiring to their rooms to lie depressed and miserable on their beds or to sit around with one another, as a number of them did in the evenings anyway, discussing the ways they had tried to kill themselves.

Several times he sat in the corner of the rec room with the small gang of suicidal patients and listened to them recalling the ardor with which they had planned to die and bemoaning how they had failed. Each of them remained immersed in the magnitude of his or her suicide attempt and the ignominy of having survived it. That people could really do it, that they could control their own death was a source of fascination to them all—it was their natural subject, like boys talking about sports. Several described feeling something akin to the rush that a psychopath must get when he kills someone else sweeping over them when they attempted to kill themselves. A young woman said, "You seem to yourself and to everyone around you paralyzed and wholly ineffectual and yet you can decide to commit the most difficult act there is. It's exhilarating. It's invigorating. It's euphoric." "Yes," said

someone else, "there's a grim euphoria to it. Your life is falling apart, it has no center, and suicide is the one thing you can control." One elderly man, a retired schoolteacher who had tried to hang himself in his garage, gave them a lecture on the ways "outsiders" think about suicide. "The one thing that everyone wants to do with suicide is explain it. Explain it and judge it. It's so appalling for the people that are left behind that there has to be a way of thinking about it. Some people think of it as an act of cowardice. Some people think of it as criminal, as a crime against the survivors. Another school of thought finds it heroic and an act of courage. Then there are the purists. The question for them is: was it justified, was there sufficient cause? The more clinical point of view, which is neither punitive nor idealizing, is the psychologist's, which attempts to describe the state of mind of the suicide, what state of mind he was in when he did it." He went tediously on in this vein more or less every night, as though he were not an anguished patient like the rest of them but a guest lecturer who'd been brought in to elucidate the subject that obsessed them night and day. One evening Axler spoke up—to perform he realized, before his largest audience since he'd given up acting. "Suicide is the role you write for yourself," he told them. "You inhabit it and you enact it. All carefully staged—where they will find you and how they will find you." Then he added, "But one performance only."

In their conversation, everything private was revealed easily and shamelessly; suicide seemed like a very huge aim and living a hateful condition. Among the patients he met, there were some who knew him right off because of his handful of movies, but they were too immersed in their own struggles to take much more notice of him than they did of anyone other than themselves. And the staff was too busy to be distracted for long by his theatrical renown. He was all but unrecognizable in the hospital, not only to others but to himself.

From the moment that he had rediscovered the miracle of a night's sleep and had to be awakened for breakfast by the nurse, he began to feel the dread subside. They had given him one medication for depression that didn't agree with him, then a second, and finally a third that caused no intolerable side effects, but whether it did him any good, he could not tell. He could not believe that his improvement had anything to do with pills or with psychiatric consultations or group therapy or art therapy, all of which felt like empty exercises. What continued to frighten him, as the day of his discharge approached, was that nothing that was happening to him seemed to have to do with anything else. As he'd told Dr. Farr—and further convinced himself by having tried to the best of his ability to search for a cause during their sessions—he had lost his magic as an actor for no good reason and it was just as arbitrarily that the desire to end his life began to ebb, at least for the time being. "*Nothing* has a good reason for happening," he said to the doctor later that day. "You lose, you gain—it's all caprice. The omnipotence of caprice. The likelihood of reversal. Yes, the unpredictable reversal and its power."

Near the end of his stay he made a friend, and each night they had dinner together she repeated her story to him. He had met her first in art therapy, and after that they would sit across from each other at a table for two in the dining hall, chatting like a couple on a date, or—given the thirty-year age difference—like a father and daughter, albeit about her suicide attempt. The day they met—a couple of days after her arrival—there had been only the two of them in the art room along with the therapist, who, as though they were kindergarteners, had handed each sheets of white paper and a box of crayons to play with and told them to draw whatever they wanted. All that was missing from the room, he thought, were the little tables and chairs. To satisfy the therapist, they worked in silence for fifteen minutes and then, again for the sake of the therapist, listened attentively to the response each offered to the other's drawing. She had drawn a house and a garden, and he a picture of himself

drawing a picture, "a picture," he told the therapist when she asked him what he'd done, "of a man who has broken down and who commits himself to a psychiatric hospital and goes to art therapy and is asked there by the therapist to draw a picture." "And suppose you were to give your picture a title, Simon. What would it be?" "That's easy. 'What the Hell Am I Doing Here?'"

The five other patients scheduled to be at art therapy either were back on their beds, unable to do anything except lie there and weep, or, as though an emergency had befallen them, had rushed off without an appointment to their doctors' offices and were sitting in the waiting room preparing to lament over the wife, the husband, the child, the boss, the mother, the father, the boyfriend, the girlfriend—whomever it was they never wanted to see again, or whom they would be willing to see again so long as the doctor was present and there was no shouting or violence or threats of violence, or whom they missed horribly and couldn't live without and whom they would do anything to get back. Each of them sat waiting a turn to denounce a parent, to vilify a sibling, to belittle a mate, to vindicate or excoriate or pity themselves. One or two of them who could still concentrate—or pretend to concentrate, or strain to concentrate—on something other than the misery of their grievance would, while waiting for the doctor, leaf through a copy of *Time* or *Sports Illustrated* or pick up the local paper and try to do the crossword puzzle. Everybody else would be sitting there gloomily silent, inwardly intense and rehearsing to themselves—in the lexicon of pop psychology or gutter obscenity or Christian suffering or paranoid pathology—the ancient themes of dramatic literature: incest, betrayal, injustice, cruelty, vengeance, jealousy, rivalry, desire, loss, dishonor, and grief.

She was an elfin, pale-skinned brunette with the bony frailty of a sickly girl of about a quarter her age. Her name was Sybil Van Buren. In the eyes of the actor hers was a thirty-five-year-old body that not only refused to be strong but dreaded even the appearance of strength. And yet, for all her delicacy, she'd said to him, on the way up the path to the main residence hall from art therapy, "Will you eat dinner with me, Simon?" Amazing. Still some kind of wish in her not to be swallowed up. Or maybe she'd asked to stay on at his side in the hope that with a little luck something would ignite between them that would complete the doing in of her. He was big enough for the job, more than whale enough for a tiny bundle of flotsam like her. Even here—where, without assistance from the pharmacopoeia, any show of stability, let alone bravado, was unlikely to quell for long the maelstrom of terror swirling back of the gullet—he had not lost the loose, swaggering gait of the ominous man that had once gone toward making him such an original Othello. And so, yes, if there was still any hope for her of going completely under, perhaps it lay in cozying up to him. That's what he thought at the outset anyway.

"I had lived for so long in the constraints of caution," Sybil told him at dinner that first night. "The efficient housewife who gardens and sews and can repair everything and throws glorious dinner parties as well. The quiet, steady, loyal sidekick of the rich and powerful man, with her unambiguous wholehearted, old-fashioned devotion to the rearing of children. The ordinary existence of an insignificant mortal. Well, I went off to go shopping for groceries—what could be more mundane than that? Why would anyone in the world have to worry about that? I'd left my daughter playing out back in the yard and our little boy upstairs sleeping in his crib and my rich and powerful second husband watching a golf tournament on TV. I turned around and came home because when I got to the supermarket I realized I'd forgotten my wallet. The little one was still sleeping. And in the living room the golf game was still going, but my eight-year-old daughter, my little Alison, was sitting up on the sofa without her underpants and my rich and powerful second husband was kneeling on the floor, his head between her plump little legs."

"What was he doing there?"

"What men do there."

Axler watched her cry and said nothing.

"You've seen my artwork," she finally told him. "The sun shining down on a pretty house and the garden all in bloom. You know me. *Everybody* knows me. I think the best of everything. I prefer it that way and so does everyone around me. He got up off his knees, completely unruffled, and told me that she had been complaining about an itch and she wouldn't stop scratching herself, and so, before she did herself any harm, he had taken a look to be sure she was all right. And she was, he assured me. He could see nothing, not a blemish, not a sore, not a rash ... She was fine. 'Good,' I said. 'I came back for my wallet.' And instead of getting his hunting rifle from the basement and pumping him full of bullets, I found my wallet in the kitchen, said 'Bye again, everyone,' and went off to the store as if what I had witnessed was a commonplace occurrence. In a daze, dumbfounded, I filled two shopping carts. I would have filled two more, four more, six more if the store manager hadn't seen me blubbering away and come over to ask if I was all right. He drove me home in his car. I left our car in the lot there and was driven home. I couldn't negotiate the stairs. I had to be carried up to bed. There I lay for four days, unable to speak or eat, barely able to drag myself to the bathroom. The story was that I'd come down with a fever and been ordered to bed. My rich and powerful second husband could not have been more solicitous. My little darling Alison sweetly brought me a vase of cut flowers from my garden. I could not ask her, I could not bring myself to say, 'Who removed your underpants? What do you want to tell me? If you really had some kind of itch, you would have waited, wouldn't you, until I came home from shopping to show me? But, dear, if you didn't have an itch ... dear, if there's something you're not telling me because you're afraid to...?' But I was the one who was afraid. I could not do it. By the fourth day I had convinced myself that I had imagined everything, and two weeks later, when Alison was at school and he was at work and the little one was taking his nap, I got out the wine and the Valium and the plastic garbage bag. But I couldn't stand suffocating. I panicked. I took the pills and the wine but then I remember not getting any air and hurrying to rip the bag off. And I don't know what I regret more horribly—having tried to do it or having failed to do it. All I want to do is shoot him. Only now he's alone with them and I'm here. He's all alone with my sweet little girl! It can't be! I called my sister and asked her to stay at the house with them, but he wouldn't let her sleep there. He said there was no need. And so she left. And what can I do? I'm here and Alison's there! I was paralyzed! I did nothing that I should have done! Nothing that anyone would have done! I should have rushed the child to the doctor! I should have called the police! It was a criminal act! There are laws against such things! Instead I did nothing! But he said nothing had happened, you see. He says that I'm hysterical, that I'm deluded, that I'm mad—but I'm not. I swear to you, Simon, I'm not mad. *saw him doing it.*"

"That's horrible. A horrible transgression," Axler said. "I see why it's done what it did to you."

"It's *evil*. I need someone," she confided in a murmur, "to kill this evil man."

"I'm sure you could find a willing party."

"You?" asked Sybil in a tiny voice. "I'd pay."

"If I was a killer I would do it pro bono," he said, taking the hand she extended to him. "People

become infected with the rage when an innocent child is violated. But I'm an out-of-work actor. I'd botch the job and we'd both go to jail."

"Oh, what should I do?" she asked him. "What would you do?"

"Get strong. Cooperate with the doctor and try to get strong as fast as you can so you can go home to your children."

"You believe me, don't you?"

"I'm sure you saw what you saw."

"Can we have dinner together?"

"For as long as I'm here," he said.

"I knew in art therapy that you'd understand. There's so much suffering in your eyes."

Within months of his leaving the hospital, his wife's son died of an overdose and the marriage of the occupationless dancer to the occupationless actor ended in divorce, completing yet one more of the many millions of stories of unhappily entwined men and women.

ONE DAY AROUND NOON a black town car pulled into the driveway and parked beside the barn. It was a chauffeur-driven Mercedes and the small white-haired man who stepped out of the back seat was Jerry Oppenheim, his agent. After the hospital internment, Jerry had phoned him every week from New York to see how he was doing, but many months had gone by without their speaking—the actor having chosen at one point to stop taking the agent's calls along with most everyone else's—and the visit was unexpected. He watched Jerry, who was over eighty and walked cautiously, negotiate the stone path to the front door, a package in one hand and flowers in the other.

He opened the door before Jerry even had a chance to knock.

"Suppose I hadn't been home?" he said, helping Jerry over the sill.

"I took my chances," Jerry said, smiling gently. He had a gentle face altogether and a courteous demeanor that did not, however, compromise his tenacity in behalf of his clients. "Well, you seem all right physically, at least. Except for that hopeless look on your face, Simon, you don't look bad at all."

"And you—neat as a pin," Axler said, having himself neither changed his clothes nor shaved for days.

"I brought you flowers. I brought us a box lunch from Dean and DeLuca. Have you had lunch?"

He hadn't even had breakfast, so he merely shrugged and took the gifts and helped Jerry out of his coat.

"You drove up from New York," he said.

"Yes. To see how you're doing and talk to you face-to-face. I have news for you. The Guthrie is doing *Long Day's Journey*. They called to ask about you."

"Why me? I can't act, Jerry, and everyone knows it."

"Nobody knows any such thing. Perhaps people know that you had an emotional setback, but that doesn't set you apart from the human race. They're doing the play next winter. It gets awfully cold out there, but you'd be a wonderful James Tyrone."

"James Tyrone is a lot of lines that you have to say, and I can't say them. James Tyrone is a character that you have to be, and I can't be him. There's no way I can play James Tyrone. I can't play anyone."

"Look, you took a tumble in Washington. That happens to practically everyone sooner or later. There's no ironclad security in any art. People run into an obstacle for reasons no one knows. But the obstacle is a temporary impediment. The obstacle disappears and you go on. There isn't a first-rate actor who hasn't felt discouraged and that his career was over and that he was unable to come out of the bad period he was in. There isn't an actor who hasn't gone up in the middle of a speech and not known where he was. But every time you go out on the stage there's a new chance. Actors can recover their talent. You don't lose the skills if you've been out there for forty years. You still know how to enter and sit down in a chair. John Gielgud used to say that there were times he wished he were like a painter or a writer. Then he could retrieve the bad performance he gave that evening and take it out at midnight and redo it. But he couldn't. He had to do it there. Gielgud went through a very bad time when he could do nothing right. So did Olivier. Olivier went through a terrible period. He had a terrible problem. He couldn't look any of the other actors in the eye. He told the other actors, 'Please don't look at me, because it'll throw me.' For a while he couldn't be alone on the stage. He said to the other actors, 'Don't leave me alone out there.'"

"I know the stories, Jerry. I've heard them all. They don't have to do with me. In the past I never had more than two or three bad nights when I couldn't recover. For two or three nights I would think, 'I know I'm good, I'm just not doing it.' Maybe nobody in the audience knew it, but I knew it—it wasn't there. And on those nights when it isn't there for you it's a labor, I know that, and yet somehow you get by. You can get very good at getting by on what you get by on when you don't have anything else. But that's something different entirely. When I had a truly wretched performance, I would lie awake all night afterward thinking, 'I've lost it, I have no talent, I can't do anything.' Hours would go by, but then all of a sudden, at five or six in the morning, I'd understand what went wrong and I couldn't wait to get to the theater that evening and go on. And I'd go on and I couldn't make a mistake. A beautiful feeling. There are days when you can't wait to get there, when the marriage between you and the role is perfect and there's never a time when you're not happy to sail out onto the stage. Those are important days. And for years I had them one after the other. Well, that's over. Now if I were to go out on the stage, I wouldn't know what I was out there for. Wouldn't know where to begin. In the old days I'd do three hours of preparation in the theater for an eight o'clock curtain. By eight I was deeply inside that role—it was like a trance, like a useful trance. In *The Family Reunion* I was in the theater two and a half hours before the first entrance, working up to how to enter when you are pursued by the Furies. That was hard for me, but I did it."

"You can do it again," Jerry said. "You're forgetting who you are and what you've achieved. Your life has hardly come to nothing. Endlessly you would do things on the stage in a way I never expected and over the years that was thrilling thousands of times for the audience and always thrilling for me. You went as far away as possible from the obvious thing that any other actor would do. You couldn't be routine. You wanted to go everywhere. Out, out, out, as far out as you could go. And the audience believed in you in every moment, wherever you took them. Sure, nothing is permanently established, but so is nothing permanently lost. Your talent's been mislaid, that's all."

"No, it's gone, Jerry. I can't do any of it again. You're either free or you aren't. You're either free and it's genuine, it's real, it's alive, or it's nothing. I'm not free anymore."

"Okay, let's have some lunch then. And put the flowers in some water. The house looks fine. You look fine. A little too slimmed down, I would say, but you still look like yourself. You're eating, I hope."

"I eat."

But when they sat down to lunch in the kitchen, with the flowers in a vase between them, Axler was unable to eat. He saw himself stepping out on the stage to play James Tyrone and the audience bursting into laughter. The anxiety and fear were as naked as that. People would laugh at him because it was him.

"What do you do with the days?" Jerry asked.

"Walk. Sleep. Stare into space. Try to read. Try to forget myself for at least one minute of each hour. I watch the news. I'm up to date on the news."

"Who do you see?"

"You."

"This is no way for someone of your accomplishment to live."

"You were kind to come all the way out here, Jerry, but I can't do the play at the Guthrie. I'm finished with all that."

"You're not. You're scared of failing. But that's behind you. You don't realize how one-sided and monomaniacal your perspective has become."

"Did I write the reviews? Did this monomaniac write those reviews? Did I write what they wrote about my Macbeth? I was ludicrous and they said as much. I would just think, 'I got through that line thank God I got through that line.' I would try to think, 'That wasn't as bad as last night,' when in fact was worse. Everything I did was false, raucous. I heard this horrible tone in my voice and yet nothing could stop me from fucking up. Hideous. Hideous. I never gave a good performance, not one."

"So you couldn't do Macbeth to your satisfaction. Well, you're not the first. He's a horrible person for an actor to live with. I defy anyone to play him and not be warped by the effort. He's a murderer, he's a killer. Everything is magnified in that play. Frankly, I never understood all that evil. Forget *Macbeth*. Forget those reviews," Jerry said. "It's time to move on. You should come down to New

York and begin to work in his studio with Vincent Daniels. You won't be the first whose confidence he's restored. Look, you've done all that tough stuff, Shakespeare, the classics—there's no way this can happen to you with your biography. It's a momentary loss of confidence."

"It isn't a matter of confidence," replied Axler. "I always had a sneaking suspicion that I have no talent whatsoever."

"Well, that's nonsense. That's the depression talking. You hear actors saying it a lot when they're down the way you are. 'I don't have any real talent. I can memorize the lines. That's about it.' I've heard it a thousand times."

"No, listen to me. When I was fully honest with myself I'd think, 'Okay, all right, I have a modicum of talent or I can at least imitate a talented person.' But it was all a fluke, Jerry, a fluke that talent was given to me, a fluke that it was taken away. This life's a fluke from start to finish."

"Oh, stop this, Simon. You can still hold attention the way a big star actor does on the stage. You are a titan, for God's sake."

"No, it's a matter of falseness, sheer falseness so pervasive that all I can do is stand on the stage and tell the audience, 'I am a liar. And I can't even lie well. I am a fraud.'"

"And that is more nonsense. Think for a moment of all the bad actors—there are lots of them and they somehow get by. So to tell me that Simon Axler," Jerry said, "with his talent, can't get by is absurd. I've seen you in the past, times when you were not so happy, times when you were in psychic torment in every other way, but put a script in front of you, allow you to access this thing that you do so wonderfully, allow you to become another person, and always it's been liberating for you. Well, that's happened before and it can happen again. The love of what you do well—it can return and it will return. Look, Vincent Daniels is an ace at dealing with problems like yours, a tough, canny, intuitive teacher, highly intelligent, and a scrapper himself."

"I know his name," he told Jerry. "But I've never met him. I never had to meet him."

"He's a maverick, he's a scrapper, and he'll get you back to contending. He'll put the fight back in you. He'll start from scratch if he has to. He'll get you to give up everything you've done before if he must. It'll be a struggle, but in the end he'll get you back to where you should be. I've been to his studio and watched Vincent work. He says, 'Do one moment. We're only dealing with the single moment. Play the moment, play whatever plays for you in that moment, and then go on to the next moment. It doesn't matter where you're going. Don't worry about that. Just take it moment, moment, moment, moment. The job is to be in that moment, with no concern about the rest and no idea where you're going next. Because if you can make one moment work, you can go anywhere.' Now it sounds, you know, like the simplest notion, and that's why it's hard—it's so simple that it's the thing that everybody misses. I believe that Vincent Daniels is the perfect man for you right now. I have complete faith in him for you in your predicament. Here's his card. I came up here to give you this."

Jerry handed him the business card, and so he took it at the same time that he said, "Can't do it."

"What will you do instead? What will you do about all the roles you're ripe to play? It breaks my heart when I think of all those parts you were made for. If you accepted the role of James Tyrone, the

you could work with Vincent and find your way through it with him. This is the work he does with actors every day. I can't count the number of times at the Tonys or the Oscars that I heard the winning actor say, 'I want to thank Vincent Daniels.' He is the best."

In response Axler simply shook his head.

"Look," Jerry said, "everyone knows the feeling 'I can't do it,' everyone knows the feeling that they will be revealed to be false—it's every actor's terror. 'They've found me out. I've been found out. Let's face it, there's a panic that comes with age. I'm that much older than you, and I've been dealing with it for years. One, you get slower. In everything. Even in reading you get slower. If I go fast in reading now, too much of it goes away. My speech is slower, my memory is slower. All these things start to happen. In the process, you start to distrust yourself. You're not as quick as you used to be. And especially if you are an actor. You were a young actor and you memorized scripts one after the other after the other, and you never even thought about it. It was just easy to do. And then all of a sudden it's not as easy, and things don't happen so fast anymore. Memorizing becomes a big anxiety for stage actors going into their sixties and seventies. Once you could memorize a script in a day—now you're lucky to memorize a page in a day. So you start to feel afraid, to feel soft, to feel that you don't have that raw live power anymore. It scares you. With the result, as you say, that you're not free anymore. There's nothing happening—and that's terrifying."

"Jerry, I can't go on with this conversation. We could talk all day, and to no avail. You're good to come and see me and bring me lunch and flowers and to try to help me and encourage me and comfort me and make me feel better. It was tremendously thoughtful. I'm pleased to see you looking well. But the momentum of a life is the momentum of a life. I am now incapable of acting. Something fundamental has vanished. Maybe it had to. Things go. Don't think that my career's been cut short. Think of how long I lasted. When I started out in college I was just fooling around, you know. Acting was a chance to meet girls. Then I took my first theatrical breath. Suddenly I was alive on the stage and breathing like an actor. I started young. I was twenty-two and came to New York for an audition. And I got the part. I began to take classes. Sensememory exercises. Practice making things real. Before your performance create a reality for yourself to step into. I remember that when I began taking class we'd have a pretend teacup and pretend to drink from it. How hot is it, how full is it, is there a saucer, is there a spoon, are you going to put sugar in it, how many lumps. And then you sip it and others were transported by this stuff, but I never found any of it helpful. What's more, I couldn't do it. I was no good at the exercises, no good at all. I'd try to do this stuff and it never would work. Everything I did well was coming out of instinct, and doing those exercises and knowing those things were making me look like an actor. I would look ridiculous as I held my pretend teacup and pretended to drink from it. There was always a sly voice inside me saying, 'There is no teacup.' Well, that sly voice has now taken over. No matter how I prepare and what I attempt to do, once I am on the stage there is that sly voice all the time—"There is no teacup.' Jerry, it's over: I can no longer make a play real for people. I can no longer make a role real for myself."

After Jerry had left, Axler went into his study and found his copy of *Long Day's Journey into Night*. He tried to read it but the effort was unbearable. He didn't get beyond page 4—he put Vincent Daniels's card there as a bookmark. At the Kennedy Center it was as though he'd never acted before and now it was as though he'd never read a play before—as though he'd never read *this* play before. The sentences unfolded without meaning. He could not keep straight who was speaking the lines. Sitting there amid his books, he tried to remember plays in which there is a character who commits

suicide. Hedda in *Hedda Gabler*, Julie in *Miss Julie*, Phaedra in *Hippolytus*, Jocasta in *Oedipus the King*, almost everyone in *Antigone*, Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, Joe Keller in *All My Sons*, Don Parritt in *The Iceman Cometh*, Simon Stimson in *Our Town*, Ophelia in *Hamlet*, Othello in *Othello*, Cassius and Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, Goneril in *King Lear*, Antony, Cleopatra, Enobarbus, and Charmian in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the grandfather in *Awake and Sing!*, Ivanov in *Ivanov*, Konstantin in *The Seagull*. And this astonishing list was only of plays in which he had at one time performed. There were more, many more. What was remarkable was the frequency with which suicide enters into drama, as though it were a formula fundamental to the drama, not necessarily supported by the action as dictated by the workings of the genre itself. Deirdre in *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, Hedvig in *The Wild Duck*, Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm*, Christine and Orin in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, both in *Romeo and Juliet*, Sophocles' Ajax. Suicide is a subject dramatists have been contemplating with awe since the fifth century B.C., beguiled by the human beings who are capable of generating emotions that can inspire this most extraordinary act. He should set himself the task of rereading these plays. Yes, everything gruesome must be squarely faced. Nobody should be able to say that he did not think it through.

JERRY HAD BROUGHT a manila envelope containing a handful of mail addressed to him in care of the Oppenheim Agency. There was a time when a dozen letters from fans would come to him that way every couple of weeks. Now these few were all that had arrived at Jerry's during the past half year. He sat in the living room idly tearing the envelopes open, reading each letter's first few lines and then balling the page up and throwing it onto the floor. They were all requests for autographed photos—all but one, which took him by surprise and which he read in its entirety.

"I don't know if you'll remember me," the letter began. "I was a patient at Hammerton. I had dinner with you several times. We were in art therapy together. Maybe you won't remember me. I have just finished watching a late-night movie on TV and to my amazement you were in it. You were playing a hardened criminal. It was so startling to see you on the screen, especially in such a menacing role. How different from the man I met! I remember telling you my story. I remember how you listened to me meal after meal. I couldn't stop talking. I was in agony. I thought my life was over. I wanted it to be over. You may not know it but your listening to my story the way you did contributed to my getting through back then. Not that it's been easy. Not that it is now. Not that it ever will be. The monster I was married to has done ineradicable damage to my family. The disaster was worse than I knew when I was hospitalized. Terrible things had been going on for a long time without my knowing anything about them. Tragic things involving my little girl. I remember asking you if you would kill him for me. I told you I would pay. I thought because you were so big you could do it. Mercifully you didn't tell me that I was crazy when I said that but sat there listening to my madness as though I were sane. I thank you for that. But a part of me will never be sane again. It can't be. It couldn't be. It shouldn't be. Stupidly I sentenced the wrong person to death."

The letter went on, a single handwritten paragraph stretching loosely over three more big sheets of paper, and it was signed "Sybil Van Buren." He remembered listening to her story—summoning up his concentration and listening like that to someone other than himself was as close as he had come to acting in a long time and may even have helped *him* to recover. Yes, he remembered her and her story and her asking him to kill her husband, as though he *were* a gangster in a movie rather than another patient in a psychiatric hospital who, big as he was, was as incapable as she of violently ending his

own suffering with a gun. People go around killing people in movies all the time, but the reason they make all those movies is that for 99.9 percent of the audience it's impossible to do. And if it's that hard to kill someone else, someone you have every reason to want to destroy, imagine how hard it is to succeed in killing yourself.

2. The Transformation

HE'D KNOWN PEGEEN'S parents as good friends before Pegeen was born and had seen her first in the hospital as a tiny infant nursing at her mother's breast. They'd met when Axler and the newly married Stapleforths—he from Michigan, she from Kansas—appeared together in a Greenwich Village church basement production of *Playboy of the Western World*. Axler had played the wonderfully wild lead role of Christy Mahon, the would-be parricide, while the female lead, Pegeen Mike Flaherty, the strong-minded barmaid in her father's pub on the west coast of County Mayo, had been played by Carol Stapleford, then two months pregnant with a first child; Asa Stapleford had played Shawn Keogh, Pegeen's betrothed. When the play's run ended, Axler had been at the closing-night party to cast his vote for Christy as the name for a son and Pegeen Mike as the name for a daughter when the Stapleforths' baby arrived.

It was not likely—particularly as Pegeen Mike Stapleford had lived as a lesbian since she was twenty-three—that when she was forty years old and Axler was sixty-five they would become lovers who would speak on the phone every morning upon awakening and would eagerly spend their free time together at his house, where, to his delight, she appropriated two rooms for her own, one of the three bedrooms on the second floor for her things and the downstairs study off the living room for her laptop. There were fireplaces in all the downstairs rooms, even one in the kitchen, and when Pegeen was working in the study, she had a fire going all the time. She lived a little over an hour away, journeying along winding hilly roads that carried her across farm country to his fifty acres of open fields and the large old black-shuttered white farmhouse enclosed by ancient maples and big ashes and long, uneven stone walls. There was nobody but the two of them anywhere nearby. During the first few months they rarely got out of bed before noon. They couldn't leave each other alone.

Yet before her arrival he'd been sure he was finished: finished with acting, with women, with people, finished forever with happiness. He had been in serious physical distress for over a year, barely able to walk any distance or to stand or sit for very long because of the spinal pain that he'd put up with all his adult life but whose debilitating progress had accelerated with age—and so he was sure he was finished with everything. One of his legs would intermittently go dead so that he couldn't raise it properly while walking, and he would miss a step or a curb and fall, opening cuts on his hands and even landing on his face, bloodying his lip or his nose. Only a few months earlier his best and only local friend, an eighty-year-old judge who'd retired some years back, had died of cancer; as a result, though Axler had been based two hours from the city, amid the trees and fields, for thirty years—living there when he wasn't out somewhere in the world performing—he didn't have anyone with whom to talk or to eat a meal, let alone share a bed. And he was thinking again about killing himself as often as he had been before being hospitalized a year earlier. Every morning when he awoke to his emptiness, he determined he couldn't go another day shorn of his skills, alone, workless, and in persistent pain. Once again, the focus was down to suicide; at the center of the dispossession there was only that.

On a frigid gray morning after a week of heavy snowstorms, Axler left the house for the carport to drive the four miles into town and stock up on groceries. Pathways around the house had been kept clear every day by a farmer who did his snowplowing for him, but he walked carefully nonetheless, wearing snow boots with thick treads and carrying a cane and taking tiny steps to prevent himself from slipping and falling. Under his layers of clothes his midsection was enveloped, for safety's sake in a stiff back brace. As he started out of the house and headed for the carport he spotted a small long

tailed whitish animal standing in the snow between the carport and the barn. It looked at first like a very large rat, and then he realized, from the shape and color of the furless tail and from the snout, that it was a possum about ten inches long. Possums are ordinarily nocturnal, but this one, whose coat looked discolored and scruffy, was down on the snow-covered ground in broad daylight. As Axler approached, the possum waddled feebly off in the direction of the barn and then disappeared into a mound of snow up against the barn's stone foundation. He followed the animal—which was probably sick and nearing its end—and when he got to the mound of snow saw that there was an entry hole cleared at the front. Supporting himself with both hands on his cane, he kneeled down in the snow to peer inside. The possum had retreated too far back into the hole to be seen, but strewn about the front of the cave-like interior was a collection of sticks. He counted them. Six sticks. So that's how it's done, Axler thought. I've got too much. All you need are six.

The following morning while he was making his coffee, he saw the possum through the kitchen window. The animal was standing on its hind legs by the barn, eating snow from a drift, pushing gobs of it into its mouth with its front paws. Hurriedly he put on his boots and his coat, picked up his cane and went out the front door, and came around to the cleared path by the side of the house facing the barn. From some twenty feet away, he called across to the possum in full voice, "How would you like to play James Tyrone? At the Guthrie." The possum just kept eating snow. "You'd be a wonderful James Tyrone!"

After that day, nature's little caricature of him came to an end. He never saw the possum again—either it disappeared or perished—though the snow cave with the six sticks remained intact until the next thaw.

THEN PEGEEN stopped by. She phoned from the little house she'd rented a few miles from Prescott, a small, progressive women's college in western Vermont, where she'd recently taken a teaching job. He lived an hour west, across the state line in rural New York. It was twenty years or more since he'd seen her as a cheerful undergraduate traveling during her vacation with her mother and father. They'd be in his vicinity and stop off for a couple of hours to say hello. Every few years they all got together like that. Asa ran a regional theater in Lansing, Michigan, the town where he'd been born and raised, and Carol acted in the repertory company and taught an acting class at the state university. He'd seen Pegeen on another visit once before, a smiling, shy, sweet-faced kid of ten who'd climbed his trees and swum rapid laps in his pool, a skinny, athletic tomboy who laughed helplessly at all her father's jokes. And before that he'd seen her suckling on the maternity floor of St. Vincent's Hospital in New York.

Now he saw a lithe, full-breasted woman of forty, though with something of the child still in her smile—a smile in which she automatically raised her upper lip to reveal her prominent front teeth—and a lot of the tomboy still in her rocking gait. She was dressed for the countryside, in well-worn work boots and a red zippered jacket, and her hair, which he had incorrectly remembered as blond, like her mother's, was a deep brown and cut close to her skull, so short at the back as to appear clipped by a barber's trimmer. She had the invulnerable air of a happy person, and though her prototype was Rough Gamine, she spoke in an appealingly modulated voice, as if imitating her actress mother's diction.

As he would eventually learn, it had been some time since she'd had what she wanted rather than

its grotesque inversion. She'd spent the last two years of a six-year affair suffering in a painfully lonely household in Bozeman, Montana. "The first four years," she told him one night after they'd become lovers, "Priscilla and I had this wonderfully cozy companionship. We used to go camping and hiking all the time, even when it snowed. In the summers we'd go off to places like Alaska and hike and camp up there. It was exciting. We went to New Zealand, we went to Malaysia. There was something childlike about us adventurously roaming around the world together that I loved. We were like two runaways. Then, starting around year five, she slowly drifted away into the computer, and I was left with no one to talk to except the cats. Until then we had done everything side by side. We'd be tucked up in bed, reading—reading to ourselves, reading passages aloud to each other; for such a long time there was the rapturous rapport. Priscilla would never tell people, 'I liked that book,' but rather, 'We liked that book,' or about some place, 'We liked going there,' or about our plans, 'That's what we're going to do this summer.' We. We. We. And then 'we' weren't we—we was over. We was she and her Mac. We was she and her festering secret that blotted out everything else—that she was going to mutilate the body I loved."

The two of them taught at the university in Bozeman, and during their final two years as a couple when Priscilla got home from work, she sat in front of her computer until it was time for bed. She spent her weekends in front of the computer. She ate and drank in front of the computer. There was no more talk, no more sex; even hiking and camping in the mountains Pegeen had to undertake on her own or with people other than Priscilla whom she rounded up for companionship. Then one day, six years after they'd met in Montana and pooled their resources and set themselves up as a couple, Priscilla announced that she had begun taking hormonal injections to promote facial hair growth and deepen her voice. Her plan was to have her breasts surgically removed and become a man. Alone, Priscilla admitted, she had been dreaming this up for a long time, and she would not turn back however much Pegeen pleaded. The very next morning Pegeen moved out of the house they jointly owned, taking with her one of the two cats—"Not so great for the cats," said Pegeen, "but that was the least of it"—and she settled into a room at a local motel. She could barely gather enough composure to meet with her classes. Lonely as it had become living with Priscilla, the wound of the betrayal, the nature of the betrayal, was far worse. She cried all the time and began to write letters to colleges hundreds of miles from Montana looking for a new job. She went to a conference where colleges were interviewing people in environmental science and found a position in the East after sleeping with the dean, who became smitten by her and subsequently hired her. The dean was still Pegeen's devoted protector and paramour when Pegeen drove over to pay Axler a visit and determined that after seventeen years as a lesbian she wanted a man—this man, this actor twenty-five years her senior and her family's friend from decades back. If Priscilla could become a heterosexual male, Pegeen could become a heterosexual female.

THAT FIRST AFTERNOON, Axler tripped and fell hard on the wide stone step as he led Pegeen into the house, gashing the meaty side of the hand with which he broke the fall. "Where's your first-aid stuff?" she asked. He told her and she went inside to get it and came back out and cleaned his wound with cotton and peroxide and covered it with a couple of Band-Aids. She'd also brought him a glass of water to drink. Nobody had brought him a glass of water for a long time.

He invited her to stay for dinner. She wound up making it. Nobody had made him dinner for a

long time either. She finished off a bottle of beer while he sat at the kitchen table and watched her prepare the meal. There was a chunk of Parmesan cheese in the refrigerator, there were eggs, there was some bacon, there was half a container of cream, and with that and a pound of pasta she made them spaghetti carbonara. He was remembering the sight of her as an infant at her mother's breast while observing her as she worked in his kitchen, behaving as though the place were hers. She was a vibrant presence, solid, fit, brimming with energy, and soon enough he was no longer feeling that he was alone on earth without his talent. He was happy—an unexpected feeling. Usually at the dinner hour he had the worst blues of the day. While she cooked he went into the living room and put on Brendel playing Schubert. He couldn't remember the last time he'd bothered listening to music, and back in the best days of his marriage, it was playing all the time.

"What happened to your wife?" she asked, after they'd eaten the spaghetti and shared a bottle of wine.

"Doesn't matter. Too tedious to discuss."

"How long have you been out here without anyone else?"

"Long enough to be lonelier than I ever thought I could be. It's sometimes astonishing, sitting here month after month, season after season, to think that it's all going on without you. Just as it will when you die."

"What happened to acting?" she asked.

"I don't act anymore."

"That can't be," she said. "What happened?"

"Also too tedious to go into."

"Have you retired or did something happen?"

He stood up and came around the table and she stood and he kissed her.

She smiled with surprise. Laughing, she said, "I'm a sexual anomaly. I sleep with women."

"That wasn't hard to figure out."

Here he kissed her a second time.

"So what are you doing?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I can't say that I know. You've never been with a man?" he asked her.

"When I was in college."

"Are you with a woman now?"

"More or less," she replied. "Are you?"

"No."

He felt the strength in her well-muscled arms, he fumbled with her heavy breasts, he cupped her hard behind in his hands and drew her toward him so that they kissed again. Then he led her to the sofa in the living room, where, blushing furiously as he watched her, she undid her jeans and was with a man for the first time since college. He was with a lesbian for the first time in his life.

Months later he'd say to her, "How come you drove over that afternoon?" "I wanted to see if anybody was with you." "And when you saw?" "I thought, Why not me?" "You calculate like that all the time?" "It isn't calculation. It's pursuing what you want. And," she added, "not pursuing what you no longer want."

THE DEAN who'd hired her and brought her to Prescott was furious when Pegeen told her their affair was over. She was eight years older than Pegeen, earned more than twice as much as Pegeen, had been an important dean for over a decade, and so she refused to believe it or to allow it. She phoned Pegeen to scold her first thing every morning and called her numerous times during the night to shout at her and insult her and demand an explanation. Once she phoned from a local cemetery, where, she announced, she was "stomping around in a fury" because of the way Pegeen had treated her. She accused Pegeen of exploiting her to get the job and then opportunistically dropping her within only weeks of taking it. When Pegeen went to the pool to work out with the swim team twice a week in the late afternoon, the dean turned up to swim at that hour and arranged to take the locker next to Pegeen's. The dean called to invite her to a movie, to a lecture, to a concert and dinner. She called every other day to tell Pegeen that she wanted to see her that coming weekend. Pegeen had already made it clear that she was busy on weekends and didn't want to resume seeing her again. The dean pleaded, she shouted—sometimes she cried. Pegeen was the person she could not live without. A strong, successful, competent woman of forty-eight, a dynamic woman touted to be Prescott's next president, and how easily she could be derailed!

One Sunday afternoon she called his house and asked to speak to Pegeen Stapleford. Axler put down the phone and went into the living room to tell Pegeen the call was for her. "Who is it?" he asked her. Without hesitation, she replied, "Who else could it be? Louise. How does she know where I am? How did she get your number?" He returned to the phone and said, "There's no Pegeen Stapleford here." "Thank you," the caller said and hung up. The next week Pegeen ran into Louise on the campus. Louise told her that she was going away for ten days and that when she came back, Pegeen had "better do something for her" like "make her dinner." Afterward Pegeen was frightened, first because Louise wouldn't leave her alone even after she once again clarified that the affair was over, and second because of the threat Louise's anger embodied. "What's threatened?" he asked. "What? My job. There's no limit to the harm she can do me if she sets her mind to it." "Well, you have me, don't you?" he said. "What does that mean?" "You have me to fall back on. I'm right here."

He was here. She was here. Everyone's possibilities had changed dramatically.

THE FIRST ARTICLE of clothing he bought her was a tan close-fitting waist-length leather jacket with a

shearling lining that he saw in the window of a shop in the upscale village that lay ten miles through the woods from his house. He went in and purchased what he guessed correctly to be her size. The jacket cost a thousand dollars. She'd never owned anything that expensive before, and she'd never looked so good in anything before. He told her it was for her birthday, whenever that fell. For the next few days, she didn't take it off her back. Then they drove to New York, ostensibly to have some good meals and go to the movies and get away for the weekend together, and he bought her more clothes—by the time the weekend was over, more than five thousand dollars' worth of skirts, blouses, belts, jackets, shoes, and sweaters, outfits in which she looked very different from the way she looked in the clothes she'd brought east with her from Montana. When she'd first showed up at his house, she owned little that couldn't be worn by a sixteen-year-old boy—only now had she begun to give up walking like a sixteen-year-old boy. In the New York stores, after trying on something new in the dressing room, she'd come out to where he was waiting for her to show him how it looked and to hear what he thought. She was paralyzingly self-conscious for only the first few hours; after that she let it happen, eventually emerging coquettishly from the dressing room smiling with delight.

He bought her necklaces, bracelets, and earrings. He bought her luxurious lingerie to replace the sport bras and the gray briefs. He bought her little satin babydolls to replace her flannel pajamas. He bought her calf-high boots, a brown pair and a black pair. The only coat she owned she'd inherited from Priscilla's late mother. It was way too large for her and shaped like a box, and so over the next few months he bought her flattering new coats—five of them. He could have bought her a hundred. He couldn't stop. Living as he did, he rarely spent anything on himself, and nothing made him happier than making her look like she'd never looked before. And in time nothing seemed to make her happier. It was an orgy of spoiling and spending that suited them both just fine.

Still, she didn't want her parents to learn about the affair. It would cause them too much pain. He thought, More pain than when you told them you were a lesbian? She'd explained to him what had happened on that day back when she was twenty-three. Her mother had cried and said, "I can't imagine anything worse," and her father feigned acceptance but didn't smile again for months. There was a lot of trauma in that home for a long time after Pegeen told them what she was. "Why would learning about me cause them so much pain?" he asked her. "Because they've known you so long. Because you're all the same age." "As you wish," he said. But he couldn't stop pondering her motive. Perhaps she was acting out of the habit of keeping her life in different compartments, the sexual life strictly separated from her life as a daughter; maybe she didn't want the sex contaminated or domesticated by filial concerns. Maybe there was some embarrassment about her turning from sleeping with women to sleeping with a man, and an uncertainty as to whether the switch was going to be permanent. But regardless of what was prompting her, he felt he had made a mistake in allowing her to keep their connection a secret from her family. He was too old not to feel compromised by having to be kept a secret. Nor did he see why a forty-year-old woman should be so concerned about what her parents thought, especially a forty-year-old woman who'd done all sorts of things that her parents disapproved of and whose opposition she weathered. He did not like that she was showing herself to be less than her age, but he didn't push it, not for now, and so her family continued to think she was going along leading her regular life while, with the passing months, she seemed to him, slowly but naturally, to shed the last visible signs of what she now referred to as "my seventeen-year mistake."

Nonetheless, one morning at breakfast, as much to his own surprise as hers, Axler said, "Is this something you really want, Pegeen? Though we've enjoyed each other so far, and the novelty has been strong, and the feeling has been strong, and the pleasure has been strong, I wonder if you know what

you're doing."

"Yes, I do. I love this," she said, "and I don't want it to stop."

"But you understand what I'm referring to?"

"Yes. Matters of age. Matters of sexual history. Your old connection to my parents. Probably twenty things besides. And none of them bother me. Do any of them bother you?"

"Would it perhaps be a good idea," he replied, "before hearts get broken, for us to back off?"

"Aren't you happy?" she asked.

"My life has been very precarious over the past few years. I don't feel the strength that it would take having my hopes dashed. I've had my share of marital misery, and before that my share of breakups with women. It's always painful, it's always harsh, and I don't want to court it at this stage of life."

"Simon, we both have been dropped," she said. "You were at the bottom of a breakdown and you were picked up and left you to fend for yourself. I was betrayed by Priscilla. Not only did she leave me, she left the body that I'd once loved to become a man with a mustache named Jack. If we do fail, let it be because of us, not because of them, not because of your past or mine. I don't want to encourage you in a risk, and I know it is a risk. For both of us, by the way. I feel the risk too. It's of a different sort than yours, of course. But the worst outcome possible is for you to take yourself away from me. I could not bear to lose you now. I will if I have to, but as for the risk—the risk has been taken. We've already done it. It's too late for protection by withdrawing."

"You're saying you don't want to get out of this thing while the getting is good?"

"Absolutely. I want you, you see. I've come to trust that I have you. Don't pull away from me. I love this, and I don't want it to stop. There's nothing else I can say. All I can say is that I'll try if you will. This is no longer just a fling."

"We took the risk," he said, echoing her.

"We took the risk," she replied.

Four words meaning that it would be the worst possible time for her to be dropped by him. She will say whatever she needs to say, he thought, even if the dialogue verges on soap opera, to keep it going because she's still aching, all these months later, from the Priscilla shock and the Louise ultimatums. It's not deception her taking this line—it's the way we are instinctively strategic. But eventually a day will come, Axler thought, when circumstances render her in a much stronger position for it to end, whereas I will have wound up in a weaker position merely from having been too indecisive to cut it off now. And when she is strong and I am weak, the blow that's dealt will be unbearable.

He believed he was seeing clearly into their future, yet he could do nothing to alter the prospect. He was too happy to alter it.

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