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TO THE PRESENT TIME
BY NATHANIEL BENTLEY
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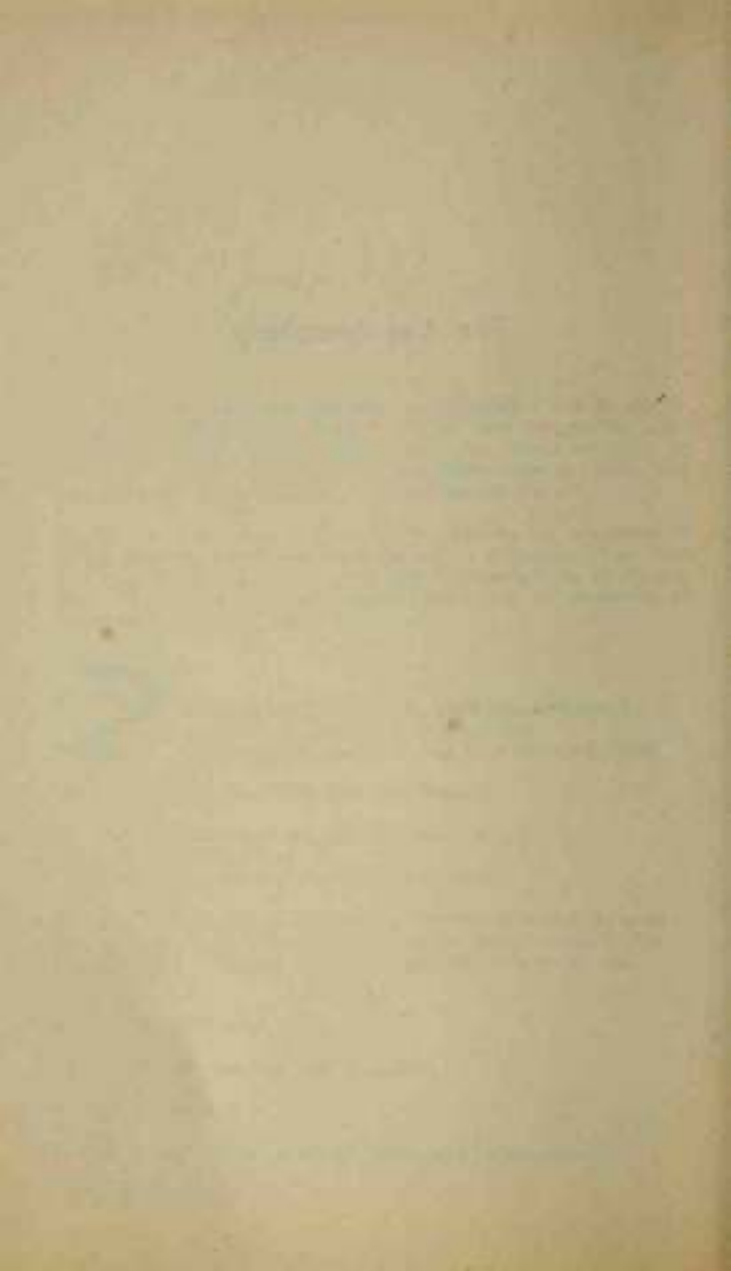
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For Ann Arensberg

PART ONE



PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

GUIDO MORRIS AND VINCENT CARDWORTHY were third cousins. No one remembered which Morris had married which Cardworthy, and no one cared except at large family gatherings when this topic was introduced and subjected to the benign opinions of all. Vincent and Guido had been friends since babyhood. They had been strolled together in the same pram and as boys were often brought together, either at the Cardworthy home in Pezic, Connecticut, or at the Morris's in Boston to play marbles, climb trees, and set off cherry bombs in trash cans and mailboxes. As teenagers, they drank beer in hiding and practiced smoking Guido's father's cigars, which did not make them sick, but happy. As adults, they both loved a good cigar.

At college they fooled around, spent money, and wondered what would become of them when they grew up. Guido intended to write poetry in heroic

couplets and Vincent thought he might eventually win the Nobel Prize for physics.

In their late twenties they found themselves together again in Cambridge. Guido had gone to law school, had put in several years at a Wall Street law firm, and had discovered that his heart was not in his work, and so he had come back to graduate school to study Romance languages and literature. He was old for a graduate student, but he had decided to give himself a few years of useless pleasure before the true responsibilities of adulthood set upon him. Eventually, Guido was to go to New York and take over the stewardship of the Morris family trust—the Magna Charta Foundation, which gave money to civic art projects, artists of all sorts, and groups who wished to preserve landmarks and beautify their cities. The trust put out a bimonthly magazine devoted to the arts called *Rosnymexale*. The money for all this came from a small fortune in textiles made in the early nineteenth century by a former sea captain by the name of Robert Morris. On one of his journeys, Robert Morris had married an Italian wife. Thereafter, all Morrises had Italianate names. Guido's grandfather was Almanso. His father was Sandro. His Uncle Giancarlo was the present administrator of the trust but he was getting on and Guido had been chosen to be eventual heir.

Vincent had gone off to the University of London and had come back to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He had begun as a city planner, but his true field of interest was sanitation engineering, as it was called, although Vincent called it garbage. He was fascinated by its production, removal, and possible uses. His monographs on recycling, published in a magazine called *City Limits*, were beginning to make him famous in his field. He had also patented a small machine for home use that turned vegetable peelings, newspapers, and other kitchen leavings into valuable

much, but nothing much had happened to it. Eventually he would go off to New York and give over his talent and energy to the Board of City Planning.

With their futures somewhat assured, they lolled around Cambridge and wondered whom they would marry.

One Sunday afternoon in January, Vincent and Guido found themselves perusing an exhibition of Greek vases at the Fogg Museum. The air outside was heavy and wet. Inside, it was overheated. It was the sort of day that forced you out of the house and gave you nothing back in return. They had been restless indoors, edgy out of doors, and had settled on the Fogg feeling that the sight of Greek vases might cool them out. They took several turns around. Guido delivered himself of a lecture on shape and form. Vincent gave his two minutes on the planning of the Greek city-state. None of this quieted them. They were looking for action, unsure of what kind and unwilling to seek it out. Vincent believed that the childish desire to kick tires and smash bottles against walls was never lost but relegated, in adulthood, to the subconscious where it jumped around creating just the sort of tension he was feeling. A sweaty round of handball or a couple of well-set cherry bombs would have done them both a lot of good, but it was too cold for the one and they were too refined for the other. Thus they were left with their own nerves.

On the way out, Guido saw a girl sitting on a bench. She was slender, fine-boned, and her hair was the blackest, sleekest hair Guido had ever seen. It was worn the way Japanese children wear theirs, only longer. Her face seemed to print itself on his heart indelibly.

He stopped to stare at her and when she finally looked back, she glared through him. Guido nudged

Vincent and they moved toward the bench on which she sat.

"The perspective is perfect," said Guido. "Notice the subtlety of line and the intensity of color."

"Very painterly," said Vincent. "What is it?"

"To have to look it up," said Guido. "It appears to be an inspired mix of schools. Notice that the nose tilts—a very slight distortion giving the illusion of perfect clarity." He pointed to her collar. "Note the exquisite folds around the neck and the drapery of the rest of the figure."

During this recitation, the girl sat perfectly still. Then, with deliberation, she lit a cigarette.

"Notice the arc of the arm," Guido continued. The girl opened her perfect mouth.

"Notice the feeble-mindedness that passes for wit among aging graduate students," she said. Then she got up and left.

The next time Guido saw her, she was getting on the bus. The weather had become savagely cold and she was struggling to get change out of her wallet but her gloves were getting in her way. Finally, she pulled off one of her gloves with her teeth. Guido watched, entranced. She wore a fur hat and two scarves. As she came down the aisle, Guido hid behind his book and stared at her all the way to Harvard Square, which was, it turned out, their common destination. They confronted each other at the newsstand. She looked him up and down and walked away.

Two weeks later she turned up under more felicitous circumstances. She appeared at a tea room with a girl named Paula Pierce-Williams, whom Guido had known all his life. Paula waved at him, and he ambled over to their table.

"Guido, this is Holly Sturgis," said Paula. "And Holly, this is Guido Morris."

"We've met," said Holly Sturgis.

"I never see you anymore, Guido," said Paula.

"Are you still working on your thesis?"

"I'm almost finished," said Guido.

"I can never remember what it's on," said Paula.

"Medieval property law and its relationship to courtly love," said Guido. Holly Sturgis snickered.

Guido was not in the habit of falling in love with girls he saw on buses or in museums. He had had two serious love affairs and a small number of casual encounters. These he tried not to think about—they had puzzled and hurt him. He explained to himself that he was an old-fashioned man living in modern times, shackled with the belief that all real love affairs led to marriage. If they did not, they must in some way be bogus, built on bad faith or lack of true emotion. Therefore they were bad—once they were over, no matter how ardently one had begun them. The casual encounters Guido chalked up to sheer impulse. You could not call something that lasted for a day a love affair. Vincent tried to explain that these things were a matter of process—the process of growing up, but this was no consolation to Guido. In the case of his two serious love affairs, the partings had been equitable but not understandable: both the girls had married and sent him cards at Christmas. Where, he wondered, had all that feeling gone?

Now as he entered his thirties, he believed that one made mistakes in love until one was perfectly sure. That surely found its object in Holly Sturgis. He was serious in matters of the heart, and serious in matters of aesthetics. Something about Holly Sturgis struck him profoundly. One look announced her elegance and precision. Everything about her—the calculation of her moves, the grace with which she walked, the fact

that she took off her gloves with her teeth—moved him. He believed that desire was mere shorthand for aesthetics and intuition. He wanted Holly Sturgis, plain and simple. He wanted access to that sleek, vital Japanese hair. He wanted her naked in his naked arms. He imagined that her shoulders smelled coolly of jasmine.

In the way of people who fantasize rather than analyze, he knew that Holly was probably difficult, quirky, and hard to live with. It was obvious that she was precise—even her hair was precise. He knew all this because his daydreams were usually accurate—Vincent said he was a visual thinker. And so he imagined himself and Holly lying against crisp white sheets at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. He did not bother to imagine how they got there or what led up to it. There would be anemones on the night table. Holly's hair would look like a sable paintbrush against the pillow and in his daydream she was smoking, balancing the ashtray on her stomach. The late afternoon light would be fuzzy with smoke. She would be entirely silent. He, of course, would be consumed by the event—it would be the first time they had been to bed together—and he saw himself looking cautiously at Holly, but unable to tell what that lovely, intelligent face was expressing or concealing from view.

Paula Vorce-Williams poured the tea. Then she went off to make a telephone call.

"Did you engineer this?" Holly said.

"Certainly not," said Guido. "I can't help it if you follow me around."

"I don't find that amusing. What do you want?"

"I want you to be more gracious to people who fall at your feet."

"I don't notice you falling at my feet."

"Maybe you don't know how to look," said Guido. He saw Paula walking toward them and quickly

asked Holly to have dinner with him. To his astonishment, she said yes.

Their first encounter did not take place at the Ritz-Carlton, but at Holly's. The anemones Guido had daydreamed about were a series of ferns that hung above her bed and got into his eyes when he sat up. The sheets were crisp, but not white. They were printed with violets. The pillowcases were decorated with blue roses. Holly was smoking and the ashtray balanced on her stomach was a little Wedgwood plate decorated with black vines.

Holly's apartment was white and airy and it was as precise as Guido had imagined. Holly made small, absolute arrangements of things. On a white table was a bird's nest, an Egyptian figure in blue stone, a Russian match box, and a silver ink-well. The bed, before they had rumped it, was made so that you could roll a dime across it. The sheets and pillows smelled of lavender.

It was better than a daydream, better than those highly ornate night dreams that leave behind a sweet taste of inexplicable happiness in the morning. Guido turned to Holly and touched her dark, shining hair. She was wearing coral earrings the size of tuxedo studs and nothing else. It was a cold, rainy Saturday afternoon in late March, and Guido felt quite wiped out by sensation. Everything seemed uncommonly rich to him: the print on the sheets, the pattern on the quilt, Holly's gleaming hair and earrings. Her shoulders did smell of jasmine. When Guido turned to look at her, he saw on her face the look he had known he would see—a look so private and impenetrable and unclear that it rendered anything he thought of to say inappropriate.

Holly was the granddaughter of old Walker Sturgis,

who had taught classics. Her father was an executive in a copper company and her mother wrote historical novels for children. She was an only child, an only grandchild, and she was nearly perfect. She had her own ways, Holly did. She decanted everything into glass and on her long kitchen shelves were row upon row of jars containing soup, pencils, cookies, salt, tea, paper clips, and dried beans. She could tell if one of her arrangements was off by so much as a sixteenth of an inch and she corrected it. She was constantly fighting off the urge to straighten paintings in other people's houses. In her own house, her collection of botanical watercolors was absolutely straight. The shoes in her closet were stuffed with pink tissue paper and her drawers were filled with lavender sachet. In each corner of her closet hung a powder puff.

She liked to have tea on a tray and she was fond of unmatched china. The tray she brought to Guido held cups that bore forget-me-nots, a lily-of-the-valley sugar dish, a cream pitcher with red poppies, and a teapot covered with red roses and cornflowers. This tray, when set on the bed, contributed to Guido's sensory overload. He was touched to think that this effort had been made on his behalf, but when he got to know Holly better he learned that she made up identical trays for herself when she studied.

Guido had wondered if she knew how to cook. Her slight air of otherworldliness suggested that she did not, while her precision indicated that she did—in the way the Japanese did. He expected a dinner that looked like a painting. It turned out that she was a real marvel. Guido was surprised by the sheer deliciousness of it: food that good must, he felt, spring from a truly charitable, loving spirit. But charity did not seem to be in Holly's immediate emotional vocabulary. After a spectacular afternoon in bed, they

had spent the rest of the day in polite half silence. Therefore, dinner almost did him in. Not only did it taste wonderful, it looked wonderful. Guido pegged Holly as a strong domestic sensualist. She had a positive genius for comfort but he was only a visitor: that comfort had been created long before he met her.

He spent a sleepless night next to her, very much aware, even when he dozed, that he was sleeping in a stranger's bed. He dreamed brief, disconnected dreams and woke suddenly, unsure of where he was. The sight of Holly did not immediately locate him—she seemed so dreamlike and unapproachable. He spent a long time gazing at her and realized that he did not want to go to sleep. He did not want to miss a minute of her.

But he did sleep, and when he woke, she was nestled beside him. But would she nestle up so sweetly when awake? She woke with a little shrug and rolled away. Guido sat up, catching his hair in the hanging fern. He was very bleary and beset by impulses: he felt all awash. He wanted to turn Holly into water and drink her. He wanted to throw himself at her feet. He wanted to throw himself at her entirely. Holly turned over and looked at him.

"See," she said. "Would you mind getting the papers?"

And so, Sunday morning, the occasion of their first breakfast together, found Guido walking through a light rain to get the papers. On the way back, he felt a slight foreboding: had her request been the intimate summons of a lover, or did she just want him out of the house? Or did she ask all her lovers to get the papers? Suppose she forgot all about him while he was gone and did not let him back in?

It had taken him an arduous two months to get

into Holly's arms—two months of dinners, walks, conversation, afternoons at museums, and long talks at night. He had never concealed his intentions. He did not say he was in love, but he did say that he was in pursuit. Holly said she would consider his pursuit. Other than that, she was unswervable, unflappable, untouched, and completely separate. She continued to see him, and Guido was left wondering what sort of test he was being put through, and whether or not he would pass.

One night, when he had been positively addled by desire, she went to her writing desk and with a gold pen wrote out a list that she then presented to him. It was, she said, a list of the things she liked about him. The list read: eyes, hands, shoulders, clothes, and height. Guido pressed for further information.

"I hate soft hands," said Holly. "Yours are nice and strong. Where did you get your calluses from?"

"Building bookshelves and fishing," said Guido. "Go on."

"Well, I admire your height and I like the way you carry yourself. I have always had a fondness for hazel eyes and whoever cuts your hair has struck the perfect balance between shagginess and propriety. I like dark-haired men. And I like the way you wear your clothes."

Guido was so unnerved by this recitation that he had to fight the impulse to run to a mirror to see if he were the man she was describing. Did he have hazel eyes? Was he tall? Did he have dark hair and was that hair midway between shagginess and propriety?

Now as he turned the corner to her flat, newspapers under his arm, he wondered at what point Holly had decided in his favor. She had arranged to spend Saturday afternoon with him and it was perfectly clear in what manner it was to be spent. But what

did that mean? She treated him exactly as she had before, except now they were lovers, and now he looked like any of the sleepy, overrated husbands walking home with the Sunday papers. He was struck with envy at the sight of them. He imagined them going home to secure marriages, well-cherished spouses who would greet them with warm kisses and a plate of eggs, or who would still be sleeping—warm, cozy, and comfortable—their romantic battles far behind them. It did not occur to Guido that some of these men might be single or divorced, or in a state of romantic torture exactly like his own. That imagined security pleased Guido, who was not walking toward a safe haven but to an encounter with a stranger in a stranger's house.

Every morning Holly woke at eight. This morning had been no exception. Guido appeared with the papers at eight-thirty, lured Holly back to bed, and felt himself temporarily the king of the universe. Three hours later they were finishing breakfast and reading the paper, but the news had little charm for Guido. What appeared to him as a great event in no way altered Holly's routine. Every Sunday she read the paper in a certain order. This Sunday was no exception. She read the society pages first to see who was getting engaged or had gotten married. Then she read the obituaries to see who had died. She read the arts and leisure section with special attention to the garden page, although she had no garden. She read at least two articles in the magazine section, studied the recipe of the week with a frown of disapproval, and then breezed through the fashion pages to see if there was anything she approved of. While Guido was undergoing a fit of desire, she read a long article about morality and genetics and then concentrated with complete absorption on an essay outlining the pitfalls

and benefits of teaching infants how to swim. It was clear that she did not want to be spoken to. She sat upright in her straight-backed chair, neat as a cupcake, wearing a linen night shirt. Watching her, Guido began to realize why most violent crimes take place in the home: he wanted to strangle her. He wanted to get his hands on her and make her his. Finally, she had read the paper. The dishes had been washed and Holly was about to begin the crossword puzzle when Guido grabbed her.

"Goddamn it, Holly. Doesn't any of this mean anything to you?"

"Any of what?"

"We just spent our first night together and here you are doing the goddamned puzzle."

"I do the puzzle every Sunday," said Holly. "And I was assuming that this was the first of many nights. Besides, I find all this too nerve-racking and so I like to put things into the most normal context. I don't want one of those strung-out love affairs that makes you lose weight and feel awful all the time."

There was nothing Guido could say to this. The first of many nights, she said. That phrase, in her cool, measured voice, undid him. And she was right to want everything normal. That sentiment moved him profoundly, as did everything else about her. For Guido was having one of those strung-out love affairs that made him lose weight and feel awful all the time.

But she did put the crossword puzzle down, and locked her arms around Guido's neck. It was clear she knew how tender and fragile men are in these matters.

It was late in the afternoon when they again climbed out of bed. Guido felt that time had woven into one solid block and he was losing his bearings. He felt

swarmed by detail: her look, her hair, her body, those sheets, that French toast, the memory of that formal tea tray and naked Holly pouring tea into his flowered cup. He badly needed a change of context. He needed to get Holly on his turf, if only for a little while. He wanted to see Holly feel strange in his apartment in order to right the balance. The sight of Holly sitting in his chair would put the cap on the reality of her, once and for all.

She took his arm as they walked and when it began to drizzle she nestled closer to him under the umbrella. She was talking about men's apartments.

"I've seen a few," she said. "All you boys wear pressed shirts and have your shoes polished and behave like perfect gentlemen at the dinner table, but there's hair all over the soap and none of the dishes are properly washed. Or, on the other hand, you look like wretches and your apartments look like monks' cells or a picture out of *Boy's Life* with the bed made with camp blankets and the fishing rods stacked neatly in the corner. Then, of course, there's the hunting print set. Big pictures of dead elks and club chairs and those footstools that have feet made out of tusks. Disgusting. I have never been in one of those apartments that didn't have wedding invitations with ducal crests on the mantel."

Guido's rooms were neat and orderly. There were no hunting prints and no tusks, and no wedding invitations with ducal crests. She admired his two framed drawings and the bronze panther that had been his grandfather's paperweight. She ran her fingers over his walnut cigar box. Then she took off her coat and did something that made Guido's heart turn over. She went through the kitchen cabinets, the icebox, picked glasses off the shelves and held them up to the light. In the bathroom she flipped back the shower curtain

to inspect the hem and looked over the soap, to see if it had hair on it.

"Do you mind me doing this?" she asked. Guido was speechless. It was the most open-ended gesture he had ever seen. He had no idea what was meant by it. Was she checking him out? Curious about his arrangements? Malicious? Solicitous? Making sure they were made for each other? Was this a joke, or was she establishing a rapport with his apartment?

Suddenly, she turned on him.

"Either you have a girlfriend, a cleaning woman, or you are entirely compulsive," she said.

"I'm very orderly," Guido said. "Once in a while I get a kid in from the student agency to do some heavy cleaning. You'd be amazed how efficient budding sociologists and historians can be."

Holly sat down, as if at home. But, Guido wondered, would she be happy where there were no trays?

They went out for dinner and she spent the night. Her clothes hung neatly over the back of his chair. Guido would have gladly slept with her clothes too. He wanted every bit of her that he could get. He had never wanted anything so ardently in his life. In the middle of the night, he woke to ponder his feeling of deprivation, even though his heart's desire was closer than arm's reach. Now it was his—or was it? Holly slept effortlessly. She had made up her mind about him, one way or the other, but she kept her decisions to herself. Any fool would think that her complacency at the breakfast table, her inspection of his apartment, the deliberateness with which she opened her arms to him indicated that she had chosen him, but Guido was not any fool. He had had time to survey his cool, unflappable beloved. She withdrew as if withdrawal was as natural as drinking coffee, and she did not make emotional statements. Was this withdrawal or concealment, or had everything been settled to her sat-

isfaction? This stance of hers drove Guido into a lether of confusion, although he knew that everyone feels odd at the beginning of a love affair.

Guido was not a fan of rashness. He had only shown what he felt, not told. He had always known that once his affections were firmly placed, excess would rapidly follow. Now what he felt was the emotional equivalent of extreme thirst. He wanted to stay up all night and watch Holly, who had gone off to sleep and left him.

Vincent Cardworthy was the most open-minded, tolerant, intelligent, and cheerful person Guido had ever met. Although in matters of his own heart he was deeply muddled, Vincent was right on the money when it came to the affairs of others. Thus Guido took guidance from a man who constantly fell in—never fell in love—with vague blond girls who either were on the verge of engagement or had just left their husbands, or were recovering from some grand passion or were just about to leave on an extended tour of Europe, or were in fact European and just about to return to their native land. Guido thought these girls were far beneath Vincent, but Vincent did not appear to care, at least after the event. He began these affairs with high spirits and then rapidly became bored, but he never broke them off. He was either far too kind or far too removed to do so. Rather, he let life take over. Since none of these encounters was destined for success, they simply evaporated. Vincent was never unkind or cruel. He made appalling choices and then treated them very well. The sort of girl he liked was raw-boned and healthy. He liked a girl who always looked as if she had just left the tennis court or come in from a nice, long hike.

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