

The Dying Animal

Philip Roth

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Houghton Mifflin Company

BOSTON · NEW YORK

2001

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Roth, Philip.

The dying animal / Philip Roth.

I. Title

p. cm.

ISBN 0-618-13587-1

PS3568.0855 D95 2001

813'.54—dc21 00-054225

Printed in the United States of America

Book design by Robert Overholtzer

QUM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For N. M.

The body contains the life story just as
much as the brain.

—EDNA O'BRIEN

I knew her eight years ago. She was in my class. I don't teach full-time anymore, strictly speaking don't teach literature at all—for years now just the one class, a big senior seminar in critical writing called Practical Criticism. I attract a lot of female students. For two reasons. Because it's a subject with an alluring combination of intellectual glamour and journalistic glamour and because they've heard me on NPR reviewing books or seen me on Thirteen talking about culture. Over the past fifteen years, being cultural critic on the television program has made me fairly well known locally, and they're attracted to my class because of that. In the beginning, I didn't realize that talking on TV once a week for ten minutes could be so impressive as it turns out to be to these students. But they are helplessly drawn to celebrity, however inconsiderable mine may be.

Now, I'm very vulnerable to female beauty, as you know. Everybody's defenseless against something, and that's it for me. I see it and it blinds me to everything else. They come to my first class, and I know almost immediately which is the girl for me. There is a Mark Twain story in which he runs from a bull, and the bull looks up to him when he's hiding in a tree, and the bull thinks, "You are my meat, sir." Well, that "sir" is transformed into "young lady" when I see them in class. It is now eight years ago—I was already sixty-two, and the girl, who is called Consuela Castillo, was twenty-four. She is not like the rest of the class. She doesn't look like a student, at least not like an ordinary student. She's not a demi-adolescent, she's not a slouching, unkempt, "like"-ridden girl. She's well spoken, sober, her posture is perfect—she appears to know something about adult life along with how to sit, stand, and walk. As soon as you enter the class, you see that this girl either knows more or wants to. The way she dresses. It isn't exactly what's called chic, she's certainly not flamboyant, but, to begin with, she's never in jeans, pressed or unpressed. She dresses carefully, with quiet taste, in skirts, dresses, and tailored pants. Not to desensualize herself but more, it would seem, to professionalize herself, she dresses like an attractive secretary in a prestigious legal firm. Like the secretary to the bank chairman. She has a cream-colored silk blouse under a tailored blue blazer with gold buttons, a brown pocketbook with the patina of expensive leather, and little ankle boots to match, and she wears a slightly stretchy gray knitted skirt that reveals her body lines as subtly as such a skirt possibly could. Her hair is done in a natural but cared-for manner. She has a pale complexion, the mouth is bowlike though the lips are full, and she has a rounded forehead, a polished forehead of a smooth Brancusi elegance. She is Cuban. Her family are prosperous Cubans living in Jersey, across the river in Bergen County. She has black, black hair, glossy but ever so slightly coarse. And she's big. She's a big woman. The silk blouse is unbuttoned to the third button, and so you see she has powerful, beautiful breasts. You see the cleavage immediately. And you see she knows it. You see, despite the decorum, the meticulousness, the cautiously soigné style—or because of them—that she's aware of herself. She comes to the first class with the jacket buttoned over her blouse, yet some five minutes into the session, she has taken it off. When I glance her way again, I see that she's put it back on. So you understand that she's aware of her power but that she isn't sure yet how to use it, what to do with it, how much she even wants it. That body is still new to her, she's still trying it out, thinking it through, bit like a kid walking the streets with a loaded gun and deciding whether he's packing it to protect himself or to begin a life of crime.

And she's aware of something else, and this I couldn't know from the one class meeting: she finds culture important in a reverential, old-fashioned way. Not that it's something she wishes to live by. She doesn't and she couldn't—too traditionally well brought up for that—but it's important and wonderful as nothing else she knows is. She's the one who finds the Impressionists ravishing but must look long and hard—and always with a sense of nagging confoundment—at a Cubist Picasso, trying with all her might to get the idea. She stands there waiting for the surprising new sensation, the new

thought, the new emotion, and when it won't come, ever, she chides herself for being inadequate and lacking ... what? She chides herself for not even knowing what it is she lacks. Art that smacks of modernity leaves her not merely puzzled but disappointed in herself. She would love for Picasso to matter more, perhaps to transform her, but there's a scrim drawn across the proscenium of genius that obscures her vision and keeps her worshiping at a bit of a distance. She gives to art, to all of art, far more than she gets back, a sort of earnestness that isn't without its poignant appeal. A good heart, a lovely face, a gaze at once inviting and removed, gorgeous breasts, and so newly hatched as a woman that to find fragments of broken shell adhering to that ovoid forehead wouldn't have been a surprise. I saw right away that this was going to be my girl.

Now, I have one set rule of some fifteen years' standing that I never break. I don't any longer get in touch with them on a private basis until they've completed their final exam and received their grades and I am no longer officially in loco parentis. In spite of temptation—or even a clear-cut signal to begin the flirtation and make the approach—I haven't broken this rule since, back in the mid-eighties when the phone number of the sexual harassment hotline was first posted outside my office door. I don't get in touch with them any earlier so as not to run afoul of those in the university who, if they could, would seriously impede my enjoyment of life.

I teach each year for fourteen weeks, and during that time I don't have affairs with them. I play a trick instead. It's an honest trick, it's an open and above-board trick, but it is a trick nonetheless. After the final examination and once the grades are in, I throw a party in my apartment for the students. It is always a success and it is always the same. I invite them for a drink at about six o'clock. I say that from six to eight we are going to have a drink, and they always stay till two in the morning. The bravest ones, after ten o'clock, develop into lively characters and tell me what they really are interested in. In the Practical Criticism seminar there are about twenty students, sometimes as many as twenty-five, so there will be fifteen, sixteen girls and five or six boys, of whom two or three are straight. Half of this group has left the party by ten. Generally, one straight boy, maybe one gay boy, and some nine girls will stay. They're invariably the most cultivated, intelligent, and spirited of the lot. They talk about what they're reading, what they're listening to, what art shows they've seen—enthusiasms that they don't normally go on about with their elders or necessarily with their friends. They find one another in my class. And they find me. During the party they suddenly see I am a human being. I'm not their teacher, I'm not my reputation, I'm not their parent. I have a pleasant, orderly duplex apartment, they see my large library, aisles of double-faced bookshelves that house a lifetime's reading and take up almost the entire downstairs floor, they see my piano, they see my devotion to what I do, and they stay.

My funniest student one year was like the goat in the fairy tale that goes into the clock to hide. I threw the last of them out at two in the morning, and while saying good night, I missed one girl. I said, "Where is our class clown, Prospero's daughter?" "Oh, I think Miranda left," somebody said. I went back into the apartment to start cleaning the place up and I heard a door being closed upstairs. A bathroom door. And Miranda came down the stairs, laughing, radiant with a kind of goofy abandon—I'd never, till that moment, realized that she was so pretty—and she said, "Wasn't that clever of me? I've been hiding in your upstairs bathroom, and now I'm going to sleep with you."

A little thing, maybe five foot one, and she pulled off her sweater and showed me her tits, revealing the adolescent torso of an incipiently transgressive Bal-thus virgin, and of course we slept together. All evening long, much like a young girl escaped from the perilous melodrama of a Balthus

painting into the fun of the class party, Miranda had been on all fours on the floor with her rump raised or lying helplessly prostrate on my sofa or lounging gleefully across the arms of an easy chair seemingly oblivious of the fact that with her skirt riding up her thighs and her legs undecorously parted she had the Balthusian air of being half undressed while fully clothed. Everything's hidden and nothing's concealed. Many of these girls have been having sex since they were fourteen, and by their twenties there are one or two curious to do it with a man of my years, if just the once, and eager the next day to tell all their friends, who crinkle up their faces and ask, "But what about his skin? Didn't he smell funny? What about his long white hair? What about his wattle? What about his little pot belly? Didn't you feel sick?"

Miranda told me afterward, "You must have slept with hundreds of women. I wanted to see what it would be like." "And?" And then she said things I didn't entirely believe, but it didn't matter. She had been audacious—she had seen she could do it, game and terrified though she may have been while hiding in the bathroom. She discovered how courageous she was confronting this unfamiliar juxtaposition, that she could conquer her initial fears and any initial revulsion, and I—as regards the juxtaposition—had a wonderful time altogether. Sprawling, clowning, cavorting Miranda, posing with her underwear at her feet. Just the pleasure of looking was lovely. Though that was hardly the only reward. The decades since the sixties have done a remarkable job of completing the sexual revolution. This is a generation of astonishing fellators. There's been nothing like them ever before among their class of young women.

Consuela Castillo. I saw her and was tremendously impressed by her comportment. She knew what her body was worth. She knew what she was. She knew too she could never fit into the cultural world I lived in—culture was to bedazzle her but not something to live with. So she came to the party—beforehand I'd worried that she might not show up—and was outgoing with me there for the first time. Uncertain as to just how sober and cautious she might be, I had been careful not to reveal any special interest in her during the class meetings or on the two occasions when we met in my office to go over her papers. Nor was she, in those private meetings, anything other than subdued and respectful, taking down every word I said, no matter how unimportant. Always, in my office, she entered and exited with the tailored jacket worn over her blouse. The first time she came to see me—and we sat side by side at my desk, as directed, with the door wide open to the public corridor, all eight of our limbs, our two contrasting torsos visible to every Big Brother of a passerby (and with the window wide open as well, opened by me, flung open, for fear of her perfume)—the first time she wore elegant gray flannel cuffed pants, and the second time a black jersey skirt and black tights, but, as in class, there was always the blouse, against her white-white skin the silk blouse of one creamy shade or another unbuttoned down to the third button. At the party, however, she removed the jacket after a single glass of wine and boldly jacketless was beaming at me, offering a tantalizingly open smile. We were standing inches apart in my study, where I had been showing her a Kafka manuscript I own—three pages in Kafka's handwriting, a speech he'd given at a retirement party for the chief of the insurance office where he was working, a gift, this 1910 manuscript, from a wealthy married woman of thirty who'd been a student-mistress some years back.

Consuela was talking excitedly about everything. Letting her hold the Kafka manuscript had thrilled her, and so everything was emerging at once, questions nursed by her over that whole semester.

while I had secretly nursed my longing. "What music do you listen to? Do you really play the piano? Do you read all day long? Do you know all the poetry on your shelves by heart?" From every question it was clear how much she marveled—her word—at what my life was, my coherent, composed cultural life. I asked her what she was doing, what her life was like, and she told me that after high school, she didn't start college immediately—she'd decided to become a private secretary. And that's what I'd seen right off: the decorous, loyal private secretary, the office treasure to a man of power, the head of the bank or the law firm. She truly was of a bygone era, a throwback to a more mannerly time and I guessed that her way of thinking about herself, like her way of comporting herself, had a lot to do with her being the daughter of wealthy Cuban émigrés, rich people who'd fled the revolution.

She told me, "I didn't like being a secretary. I tried it for a couple of years, but it's a dull world, and my parents always wanted and expected me to go to college. I finally decided to study instead. I suppose I was trying to be rebellious, but that was childish and so I enrolled here. I marvel at the arts. Again "marvel," used freely and sincerely. "Yes, what do you like?" I asked. "The theater. All kinds of theater. I go to the opera. My father loves the opera and we go to the Met together. Puccini's his favorite. I always love going with him." "You love your parents." "Very much," she said. "Tell me about them." "Well, they're Cuban. Very proud. And they've done very well here. The Cubans who came here because of the revolution had a way of seeing the world so that somehow they all did extremely well. That first group, like my family, worked hard, did whatever they needed to do, did well to the point where, my grandfather used to tell us, some of them who needed public assistance when they first arrived, because they had nothing—from some of them, after a few years, the U.S. government started to receive checks paying them back. They didn't know what to do with it, my grandfather said. The first time in the history of the U.S. Treasury that they'd gotten a check back." "You love your grandfather, too. What is he like?" I asked. "Like my father—a steady person, extremely traditional, someone with an Old World view. Hard work and education first. Above everything. And like my father, very much a family man. Very religious. Though he doesn't go to church that much. Neither does my father. But my mother does. My grandmother does. My grandmother will pray the rosary every night. People bring her rosaries for presents. She has her favorites. She loves her rosary." "Do you go to church?" "When I was little. But now, no. My family is adaptable. Cubans of that generation had to be adaptable, to a degree. My family would like for us to go, my brother and me, but no, I don't." "What kind of restraints did a Cuban girl growing up in America have that wouldn't be typical of an American upbringing?" "Oh, I had a lot earlier curfew. Had to be home when all my friends were just starting to get together on a summer night. Home at eight on a summer night when I was fourteen and fifteen. But my father wasn't some frightening guy. He's just your average nice-guy dad. Except no boy was ever allowed in my room. Ever. Otherwise, when I got to be sixteen, I was treated the way my friends were being treated, in terms of curfews and stuff." "And your mother and father, when did they come here?" "In 1960. Fidel was still letting people go then. They were married in Cuba. They came to Mexico first. Then to here. I was born here of course." "Do you think of yourself as American?" "I was born here, but, no, I'm Cuban. Very much so." "I'm surprised, Consuela. Your voice, your manner, the way you say 'stuff' and 'guy.' You're totally American to me. Why do you think of yourself as a Cuban?" "I come from a Cuban family. That's it. That's the whole story. My family has this extraordinary pride. They just love their country. It's in their hearts. It's in their blood. They were like that in Cuba." "What do they love about Cuba?" "Oh, it was so much fun. It was a society of people that had the best of all the world. Entirely cosmopolitan, especially if you lived in Havana. And it was beautiful. And they had all these great parties. It was a really good time." "Parties? Tell me about the parties." "I have these pictures of my mother at these costume balls. From the time she came out. Pictures of her at her coming-out ball."

"What did her family do?" "Well, that's a long story." "Tell me." "Well, the first Spanish on my grandmother's side was sent there as a general. There was always a lot of old Spanish money. My grandmother had tutors at home, she went to Paris at eighteen to buy dresses. In my family, on both sides, there are Spanish titles. Some of them are very, very old titles. Like my grandmother is a duchess—in Spain." "And are you a duchess as well, Consuela?" "No," she said, smiling, "just a lucky Cuban girl." "Well, you could pass for a duchess. There must a duchess looking like you on the walls of the Prado. Do you know the famous painting of Velázquez, *The Maids of Honor*? Though there the little princess is fair, is blond." "I don't think I do." "It's in Madrid. In the Prado. I'll show it to you."

We went down the spiral steel staircase to my library stacks, and I found a large book of Velázquez reproductions, and we sat side by side and turned the pages for fifteen minutes, a stirring quarter hour in which we both learned something—she, for the first time, about Velázquez, and I, anew, about the delightful imbecility of lust. All this talk! I show her Kafka, Velázquez ... why does one do this? Well, you have to do something. These are the veils of the dance. Don't confuse it with seduction. This is not seduction. What you're disguising is the thing that got you there, the pure lust. The veils veil the blind drive. Talking this talk, you have a misguided sense, as does she, that you know what you're dealing with. But it's not as though you're interviewing a lawyer or hiring a doctor and that whatever's said along the way is going to change your course of action. You know you want and you know you're going to do it and nothing is going to stop you. Nothing is going to be said here that's going to change anything.

The great biological joke on people is that you are intimate before you know anything about the other person. In the initial moment you understand everything. You are drawn to each other's surface initially, but you also intuit the fullest dimension. And the attraction doesn't have to be equivalent: she's attracted to one thing, you to the other. It's surface, it's curiosity, but then, boom, the dimension. It's nice that she's from Cuba, it's nice that her grandmother was this and her grandfather was that, it's nice that I play the piano and own a Kafka manuscript, but all this is merely a detour on the way to getting where we're going. It's part of the enchantment, I suppose, but it's the part that if I could have none of, I'd feel much better. Sex is all the enchantment required. Do men find women so enchanting once the sex is taken out? Does anyone find anyone of any sex that enchanting unless they have sexual business with them? Who else are you that enchanted by? Nobody.

She thinks, I'm telling him who I am. He's interested in who I am. That is true, but I am curious about who she is because I want to fuck her. I don't need all of this great interest in Kafka and Velázquez. Having this conversation with her, I am thinking, How much more am I going to have to go through? Three hours? Four? Will I go as far as eight hours? Twenty minutes into the veiling and already I'm wondering, What does any of this have to do with her tits and her skin and how she carries herself? The French art of being flirtatious is of no interest to me. The savage urge is. No, this is not seduction. This is comedy. It is the comedy of creating a connection that is not the connection—that cannot begin to compete with the connection—created unartificially by lust. This is the instant conventionalizing, the giving us something in common on the spot, the trying to transform lust into something socially appropriate. Yet it's the radical inappropriateness that makes lust *lust*. No, this just plots the course, not forward but back to the elemental drive. Don't confuse the veiling with the business at hand. Sure, something else might develop, but that something has nothing to do with shopping for curtains and duvet covers and signing on as a member of the evolutionary team. The evolutionary system can work without me. I want to fuck this girl, and yes, I'll have to put up with some sort of veiling, but it's a means to an end. How much of this is cunning? I'd like to think that all

of it is.

"Shall we go together to the theater sometime?" I asked her. "Oh, I'd love to do that," she said, and I didn't know then whether she was alone or had a boyfriend, but I didn't care, and two or three days later—this is all eight years back, in 1992—she wrote a note saying "It was great to be invited to the party, to see your wonderful apartment, your amazing library, to hold in my own hands the handwriting of Franz Kafka. You so generously introduced me to Diego Velázquez..." She included her phone number along with her address, and so I called and proposed an evening out. "Why don't you join me to go to the theater? You know what my work is. I have to go to the theater almost every week, I always have two tickets, and perhaps you'd like to come."

So we had dinner together in midtown, we went to the play, it wasn't at all interesting, and I was sitting next to her, glancing at her beautiful cleavage and her beautiful body. She has a D cup, this duchess, really big, beautiful breasts, and skin of a very white color, skin that, the moment you see it makes you want to lick it. At the theater, in the dark, the potency of her stillness was enormous. What could be more erotic in that situation than the seeming absence in the exciting woman of any erotic intention?

After the play I said we could go for a drink, but there was one disadvantage. "People recognize me because of the television and, wherever we go, the Algonquin, the Carlyle, wherever, they may interfere with our sense of privacy." She said, "I noticed people noticing us already, at the restaurant and at the theater." "Did you mind?" I asked. "I don't know if I minded. I just noticed it. I wondered if you minded." "There's nothing much to be done about it," I said, "it comes with the job." "I suppose," she said, "they thought I was a groupie." "You're decidedly not a groupie," I assured her. "But I'm sure that's what they thought. 'There's David Kepesh with one of his little groupies.' They're thinking I'm some silly overwhelmed girl." "And if they did think that?" I asked. "I don't know if I like that so much. I'd like to graduate college before my parents find their daughter on Page Six of the *Post*." "I don't think you're going to be on Page Six. That's not going to happen." "I truly hope not," she said. "Look, if this is what's bothering you," I said, "we can circumvent the problem by going to my place. We can go to my apartment. We can have a drink there." "Okay," she said, but only after a serious, quietly thoughtful moment, "that's probably a better idea." Not a good idea, just a better idea.

We went to my apartment and she asked me to put on some music. I generally played easy classical music for her. Haydn trios, the *Musical Offering*, dynamic movements from the Beethoven symphonies, adagio movements from Brahms. She particularly liked Beethoven's Seventh, and on succeeding evenings she sometimes would yield to the irresistible urge to stand and move her arms playfully about in the air, as though it were she and not Bernstein conducting. Watching her breasts shift beneath her blouse while she pretended, somewhat like a performing child, to lead the orchestra with her invisible baton was intensely arousing, and, for all I know, maybe there was nothing the least bit childish about it and to excite me by way of the mock conducting was why she did it. Because it couldn't have been long before it dawned on her that to continue to believe, like a youthful student, that it was the elderly teacher who was in charge did not accord with the facts. Because in sex there is no point of absolute stasis. There is no sexual equality and there can be no sexual equality, certainly not one where the allotments are equal, the male quotient and the female quotient in perfect balance. There's no way to negotiate metrically this wild thing. It's not fifty-fifty like a business transaction. It's the chaos of eros we're talking about, the radical destabilization that is its excitement. You're back in the woods with sex. You're back in the bog. What it is is trading dominance, perpetual *imbalance*.

You're going to rule out dominance? You're going to rule out yielding? The dominating is the flint, it strikes the spark, it sets it going. Then what? Listen. You'll see. You'll see what dominating leads to. You'll see what yielding leads to.

I would sometimes, as I did that night, play a Dvořák string quintet for her—electrifying music, easy enough to recognize and to grasp. She liked me to play the piano, it created a romantic, seductive atmosphere that she liked, and so I did. The simpler Chopin preludes. Schubert, some of the *Moments Musicaux*. Some movements of the sonatas. Nothing too hard, but pieces I'd studied and didn't play too badly. Usually I play only for myself, even now that I'm better at it, but it was pleasant then to play for her. It was all part of the intoxication—for both of us. Playing music is very funny. Some things come readily now, but most pieces still have a stretch that's trouble for me, passages that I never bothered to solve all those years when I was playing by myself and didn't have a teacher. When I ran into a problem back then, I figured out some nutty way to solve it. Or didn't solve it—certain types of leaps, movement from one part of the keyboard to another in an intricate way, that was kind of finger-breaking. I didn't yet have a teacher when I knew Consuela, so I did all those stupid improvised things that I invented as solutions to technical problems. I'd had only a few lessons as a kid and, until I got a teacher five years ago, I was mostly self-taught. Very little training. If I had seriously had lessons, I would spend less time practicing than I do today. I get up early and spend two, if I can two and a half hours at daybreak practicing, which is about as much as one can do. Though some days when I'm working toward something, I have another session later on. I'm in good shape, but I get tired after a while. Both mentally and physically. I have a huge amount of music that I've read through. That's a technical term—it doesn't mean looking at it like you look at a book, it means at the piano. I've bought a lot of music, I have everything, piano literature, and I used to read it, and I used to play it, badly. Some passages maybe not so badly. To see how it worked and so on. It wasn't good in terms of playing, but I had some pleasure. And pleasure is our subject. How to be serious over a lifetime about one's modest, private pleasures.

The lessons were a present to myself on my sixty-fifth birthday for finally getting over Consuela. And I've made a lot of progress. I play some pretty difficult pieces. Brahms intermezzi. Schumann. A difficult Chopin prelude. I chew a bit off a very hard one, and I still don't play it well, but I work on it. When I say to my teacher in exasperation, "I can't do it right. How do you solve this problem?" she says, "Play it a thousand times." Like all enjoyable things, you see, it has unenjoyable parts to it, but my relationship to music has deepened and that's essential to my life now. It's wise to do this now. How much longer can there possibly be girls?

I can't say that my making music excited Consuela about me the way her conducting Beethoven in jazz excited me about her. I still can't say that anything I ever did sexually excited Consuela about me. Which was largely why, from the evening we first went to bed eight years back, I never had a moment's peace, why, whether she realized it or not, I was all weakness and worry from then on, why I could never figure out whether the answer was to see more of her or to see less of her or to see her not at all, to give her up—to do the unthinkable and, at sixty-two, voluntarily relinquish a gorgeous girl of twenty-four who hundreds of times said to me, "I adore you," but who never, even insincerely, could bring herself to whisper, "I desire you, I want you so—I cannot live without your cock."

That was not Consuela. Yet that was why the fear of losing her to someone else never left me, ~~why she was continually on my mind, why with her or apart from her I never felt sure of her.~~ The obsessional side of it was awful. When you're beguiled it helps not to think too much and just to let yourself enjoy the beguilement. But I had no such pleasure: all I did was think—think, worry, and, yes, suffer. Concentrate on your pleasure, I told myself. Why but for the pleasure do I choose to live as I do, imposing as few constraints on my independence as possible? I had the one marriage, in my twenties the bad first marriage that so many have, the bad first marriage that is as bad as boot camp, but after that I was determined not to have the bad second marriage or the third and the fourth. I was determined, after that, never to live in the cage again.

That first night we were sitting on the sofa listening to Dvořák. At one point Consuela found a book that interested her—I forget which one, though I'll never forget the moment. She turned around—I was sitting where you are, at the corner of the sofa, and she was sitting there—and she twisted her torso half around, and with the book resting on the arm of the sofa, she started to read, and because of the leaning, the bending forward, under her clothing I saw her buttocks, saw the shape clearly, which was one whopping invitation. She is a tall young woman in a slightly too narrow body. It is as if the body doesn't quite fit. Not because she's too fat. But she's by no means the anorexic type. You see there female flesh, and it is good flesh, abundant—that's *why* you see it. So there she was, not openly lying across the sofa but, all the same, with her buttocks sort of half turned to me. A woman as conscious of her body as Consuela and doing that is, I concluded, inviting me to begin. The sexual instinct is still intact—none of the Cuban correctitude has interfered. In that half-turned ass, I see that nothing has gotten in the way of the pure thing. All that we'd talked about, all that I'd had to listen to about her family, none of it has interfered. She knows how to turn her ass despite all that. Turns in the primordial way. In display. And the display is perfect. It tells me that I need no longer suppress the wish to touch.

I started to caress her buttocks, and she liked it. She said, "This is a strange situation. I can never be your girlfriend. For every possible reason. You live in a different world." "Different?" I laughed. "How different?" And right there, of course, you start the lying, and you say, "Oh, it's not such a lofty place, if that's what you're imagining. It's not such a glamorous world. It's not even a world. Once a week I appear on TV. Once a week I'm on the radio. Every few weeks I appear in print in the back pages of a magazine read by twenty people at most. My program? It's a Sunday morning cultural program. Nobody watches. It's not much of a world to worry about. I can bring you into that world easily enough. Please stay with me."

She looks to be thinking about what I've said, but what sort of thinking can it be? "Okay," she says, "for now. For tonight. But I can never be your wife." "Agreed," I said, but I thought, Who was asking her to be my wife? Who raised the question? I am sixty-two and she's twenty-four. I merely touch her ass and she tells me she can't be my wife? I didn't know such girls continued to exist. She is even more traditional than I imagined. Or maybe more odd, more unusual than I imagined. As I would discover, Consuela is ordinary but without being predictable. Nothing mechanical about her behavior. She's at once specific and mysterious, and strangely full of little surprises. But, in the beginning especially, she was difficult for me to decipher, and, mistakenly—or perhaps not—I chalked that up to her Cubanness. "I love my cozy Cuban world," she told me. "I love the coziness of my family, and I

can tell already that's not something you like or want. So I never can really belong to you."

This naive niceness in combination with her marvelous body was so enticing to me that I wasn't sure even then, on that first night, that I could fuck her as though she were another cavorting Miranda. No, Consuela was not the goat in the clock. It didn't matter what she was saying—she was so damned attractive that not only could I not resist her but I didn't see how any other man could, and it was in that moment, caressing her buttocks while she explained that she could not be my wife, that my terrible jealousy was born.

The jealousy. The uncertainty. The fear of losing her, even while on top of her. Obsessions that all my varied experience I had never known before. With Consuela as with no one else, the siphoning off of confidence was almost instantaneous.

So we went to bed. It happened fast, less because of my intoxication than because of her lack of complexity. Or call it clarity. Call it newly minted maturity, though maturity, I would say, of a simple kind: she was in communion with that body in the very way she wished and wasn't able to be in communion with art. She undressed, and not only was her blouse silk but her underwear was made of silk. She had nearly pornographic underwear. A surprise. You know she has chosen this to please. You know she has chosen this with a man's eye in mind, even if a man were never to see it. You know that you have no idea what she is, how clever she is or how stupid she is, how shallow she is or how deep she is, how innocent she is or how guileful she is, how wily, how wise, even how wicked. With a self-contained woman of such sexual power, you have no idea and you never will. The tangle that is her character is obscured by her beauty. Nonetheless, I was greatly moved by seeing that underwear. I was moved by seeing that body. "Look at you," I said.

There are two things you notice about Consuela's body. In the first place, the breasts. The most gorgeous breasts I have ever seen—and I was born, remember, in 1930: I have seen quite a few breasts by now. These were round, full, perfect. The type with the nipple like a saucer. Not the nipple like an udder but the big pale rosy-brown nipple that is so very stirring. The second thing was that she had sleek pubic hair. Normally it's curly. This was like Asian hair. Sleek, lying flat, and not much of it. The pubic hair is important because it returns.

Yes, I pulled back the covers and she came into my bed, Consuela Castillo, superclassically the fertile female of our mammalian species. And already, that first time, and at only twenty-four, she was willing to sit on top of me. She wasn't sure of herself once she was there, and till I tapped her arm to get her attention and slow her down, she was obviously overenergetic, caroming about with her eyes shut, off in a child's game of her own. It was a little like her mock conducting. I suppose she was trying to give herself over completely, but she was too young for that and, hard as she tried, that's not what she achieved. However, because she knew how alluring her breasts were and she wanted me to be able to see them at their best, she'd climbed on top of me when I asked her to. And she did something rather pornographic for a first time, and this, again to my surprise, on her own initiative—played with her breasts around my prick. Leaned forward to place my prick between her breasts, for me to see it nestling there while she pressed them together with her hands. She knew how much this vision aroused me, the skin of the one on the skin of the other. I remember I said, "Do you realize that you have the most beautiful breasts I've ever seen?" And like the efficient, thorough private secretary taking a

memo, or perhaps like the well-brought-up Cuban daughter, she replied, "Yes, I know that. I see how you respond to my breasts."

But mostly, in the beginning, the lovemaking was too spirited. She was trying too hard to impress her teacher. Slow down, be with me, I said. Less energy, more comprehension. You control the event with more subtlety than that. There's much to be said for crude naturalness, but not from afar like that. When she was first sucking me, she would move her head with a relentless rat-a-tat-tat rapidity—it was impossible not to come much sooner than I wanted to, but then, the instant I began coming, she abruptly stopped and received it like an open drain. I could have been coming into a wastepaper basket. No one had ever told her not to stop working then. None of the five previous boyfriends had dared to say that to her. They were too young. They were her age. They were glad to be getting what they got.

Then something happened. The bite. The bite *back*. The biting back of life. One night Consuela moved beyond the confines of her comforting, mannerly, habitual efficiency, progressed beyond the tutorial into the unknown adventure, and the turbulence of the affair began for me. This is how it happened. One night when she was stretched out beneath me on the bed, passively supine, waiting to have me separate her legs and slide in, I instead shoved a couple of pillows back of her head, propped up her head like that, angled it like that up against the headboard, and with my knees planted to either side of her and my ass centered over her, I leaned into her face and rhythmically, without letup, I fucked her mouth. I was so bored, you see, by the mechanical blow jobs that, to shock her, I kept her fixed there, kept her steady by holding her hair, by turning a twist of hair in one hand and wrapping it round my fist like a thong, like a strap, like the reins that fasten to the bit of a bridle.

Now, no woman really likes having her hair pulled. It's certain to turn a number of them on, but that doesn't mean they like it. And they don't like it because there's no way of getting around the act of domination that is going on, that must go on, that lets them think, It's just what I imagined sex to be. *is* brutish—this guy's not a brute but he's on to the brutishness. After I came, when I drew away, Consuela looked not just horrified but ferocious. Yes, something is finally happening to her. It is no longer so comfortable for her. She is no longer practicing scales. Uncontrollably she is in motion within. I was still above her—kneeling over her and dripping on her—we were looking each other coolly in the eye, when, after swallowing hard, she snapped her teeth. Suddenly. Cruelly. At me. It wasn't an act. It was instinctive. It was snapping her teeth by using the full force of the masticatory muscles to violently raise the lower jaw. It was as though she were saying, That's what I could have done, that's what I wanted to do, and that's what I didn't do.

At last the forthright, incisive, elemental response from the contained classical beauty. Till then it was all controlled by narcissism, by exhibitionism, and despite the energetic display, despite the audacity, it was strangely inert. I don't know whether Consuela remembers that bite, that activating bite that freed her from her own surveillance and inaugurated her into the sinister dream, but I will never forget it. The full amorous truth. The instinctual girl bursting not just the container of her vanity but the captivity of her cozy Cuban home. It was the true beginning of her mastery—the mastery into which my mastery had initiated her. I am the author of her mastery of me.

You see, I think that in me Consuela sensed a possessable version of her family's refinement, of that unrecoverable aristocratic past that is more or less a myth to her. A man of the world. A cultural authority. Her teacher. Now, most people are appalled by the vast difference in age, but it is the very

thing Consuela is drawn to. The erotic oddness is all most people register, and they register it as repugnance, as repugnant farce. But the age I am has great significance for Consuela. These girls with old gents don't do it despite the age—they're drawn to the age, they do it *for* the age. Why? In Consuela's case, because the vast difference in age gives her permission to submit, I think. My age and my status give her, rationally, the license to surrender, and surrendering in bed is a not unpleasant sensation. But simultaneously, to give yourself over intimately to a much, much older man provides this sort of younger woman with authority of a kind she cannot get in a sexual arrangement with a younger man. She gets both the pleasures of submission *and* the pleasures of mastery. A boy submitting to her power, what does that amount to in a creature so patently desirable? But to have this man of the world submitting solely because of the force of her youth and her beauty? To have gained the total interest, to have become the consuming passion of a man inaccessible in every other arena, to enter a life she admires that would otherwise be closed to her—that's power, and it's the power she wants. It isn't that the dominance is being traded sequentially; it's being traded continuously. Not so much being traded as being braided. And therein lies the source not only of my obsession with her but of her counterobsession with me. Or so I had it figured at the time, for all the good it did me in attempting to understand what she was up to and why I was getting in deeper and deeper.

No matter how much you know, no matter how much you think, no matter how much you plot and you connive and you plan, you're not superior to sex. It's a very risky game. A man wouldn't have two-thirds of the problems he has if he didn't venture off to get fucked. It's sex that disorders our normally ordered lives. I know this as well as anyone. Every last vanity will come back to mock you. Read Byron's *Don Juan*. Yet what do you do if you're sixty-two and believe you'll never have a claim on something so perfect again? What do you do if you're sixty-two and the urge to take whatever is still takable couldn't be stronger? What do you do if you're sixty-two and you realize that all those bodily parts invisible up to now (kidneys, lungs, veins, arteries, brain, intestines, prostate, heart) are about to start making themselves distressingly apparent, while the organ most conspicuous throughout your life is doomed to dwindle into insignificance?

Don't misunderstand me. It isn't that, through a Consuela, you can delude yourself into thinking that you have a last shot at your youth. You never feel the difference from youth more. In her energy, in her enthusiasm, in her youthful unknowing, in her youthful *knowing*, the difference is dramatized every moment. There's never any mistaking that it's she and not you who is twenty-four. You'd have to be a clod to feel you're young again. If you felt youthful, it would be a snap. Far from feeling youthful, you feel the poignancy of her limitless future as opposed to your own limited one, you feel even more than you ordinarily do the poignancy of every last grace that's been lost. It's like playing baseball with a bunch of twenty-year-olds. It isn't that you feel twenty because you're playing with them. You note the difference every second of the game. But at least you're not sitting on the sidelines.

Here's what happens: you feel excruciatingly how old you are, but in a new way.

Can you imagine old age? Of course you can't. I didn't. I couldn't. I had no idea what it was like. Not even a false image—no image. And nobody wants anything else. Nobody wants to face any of this before he has to. How is it all going to turn out? Obtuseness is *de rigueur*.

Understandably, any stage of life more advanced than one's own is unimaginable. Sometimes or

is halfway through the next stage before one realizes that one has entered it. And then, earlier stages advancement offer their compensations. And even so, the middle is daunting for many people. But the end? It is, interestingly, the first time of life that you stand entirely outside of while you're in it. Observing one's decay all the while (if one is as fortunate as I am), one has, by virtue of one's continuing vitality, considerable distance from one's decay—even feels oneself jauntily independent of it. Inevitably, yes, there is a multiplication of the signs leading to the unpleasant conclusion, and yet despite that, you stand outside. And the ferocity of the objectivity is brutal.

There's a distinction to be made between dying and death. It's not all uninterrupted dying. If one is healthy and feeling well, it's invisible dying. The end that is a certainty is not necessarily boldly announced. No, you can't understand. The only thing you understand about the old when you're not old is that they have been stamped by their time. But understanding only that freezes them in their time, and so amounts to no understanding at all. To those not yet old, being old means *you've been*. But being old also means that despite, in addition to, and in excess of your beenness, you still are. Your beenness is very much alive. You still are, and one is as haunted by the still-being and its fullness as by the having-already-been, by the pastness. Think of old age this way: it's just an everyday fact that one's life is at stake. One cannot evade knowing what shortly awaits one. The silence that will surround one forever. Otherwise it's all the same. Otherwise one is immortal for as long as one lives.

Not too many years ago, there was a ready-made way to be old, just as there was a ready-made way to be young. Neither obtains any longer. A great fight about the permissible took place here—an overturning. Nonetheless, should a man of seventy still be involved in the carnal aspect of the human comedy? To be unapologetically an unmonastic old man susceptible still to the humanly exciting? That is not the condition as it was once symbolized by the pipe and the rocking chair. Maybe it's still a bit of an affront to people, to fail to abide by the old clock of life. I realize that I can't count on the virtuous regard of other adults. But what can I do about the fact that, as far as I can tell, nothing, *nothing* is put to rest, however old a man may be?

She began coming to my place in a very casual manner after that bite. It was no longer a matter of evening dates and then the fucking once she realized the little it took for her to control things. She phoned and she said, "Could I come for a few hours?" and she knew I would never say no, knew that every time, to get to hear me say "Look at you" as though she were herself a Picasso, she had merely to undress and stand there. I, her teacher in Practical Criticism, the Sunday morning PBS aesthetician, New York television's reigning authority on what is the current best to see, hear, and read—I had pronounced her a great work of art, with all the magical influence of a great work of art. Not the artist but the art itself. There was nothing for her not to understand—she had only to be there, on view, and the understanding of her importance flowed from me. It was not required of her, any more than it is of a violin concerto or of the moon, that she have any sort of self-conception. That's what I was for: I was Consuela's awareness of herself. I was the cat watching the goldfish. Only it was the goldfish that had the teeth.

The jealousy. *That* poison. And unprovoked. Jealous even when she tells me she's going ice-skating with her eighteen-year-old brother. Will he be the one who steals her away? With these obsessional love affairs you are not your own confident self, not when you're in the vortex of them and

not when the girl is almost a third your age. I feel anxious unless I speak to her on the phone every day, and then I feel anxious after we've spoken. Women who in the past demanded regular calls, telephoning back and forth like that, I'd invariably gotten rid of—and now it was I demanding it of her: the daily fix by phone. Why do I flatter her when we speak? Why don't I stop telling her how perfect she is? Why do I always feel I'm saying the wrong thing to this girl? I'm unable to make out what she makes of me, what she makes of anything, and my confusion causes me to say things that sound false or exaggerated to my ear, so I hang up full of silent resentment toward her. But when the rare day passes that I'm able to discipline myself enough not to speak to her, not to call her, not to flatter her, not to sound false, not to resent what she unknowingly does to me, it's worse. I can't stop doing anything I'm doing, and everything I'm doing leaves me upset. I don't feel the authority with her that's necessary for my stability, and yet she comes to me because of that authority.

On the nights she isn't with me, I am deformed by thinking about where she may be and what she may be up to. But then even after she has been with me for the evening and has gone home, I can't sleep. The experience of her is too strong. I sit up in bed and in the middle of the night I cry out, "Consuela Castillo, leave me alone!" That's enough, I tell myself. Get up, change the sheets, shower again, get rid of the smell of her, *and then get rid of her*. You must. It's become an endless campaign with her. Where's the fulfillment and the sense of possession? If you have her, why can't you have her? You're not getting what you want even when you're getting what you want. There is no peace in it and there can't be, because of our ages and the unavoidable poignancy. Because of our ages, I have the pleasure but I never lose the longing. Had this never happened before? No. I was never sixty-two years old before. I was no longer in that phase of my life when I thought I could do everything. Yet I remembered it clearly. You see a beautiful woman. You see her from a mile away. You go to her and say, "Who are you?" You have dinner. And so on. *That* phase, when it's worry-free. You get on the bus. A creature so gorgeous everybody is afraid to sit next to her. The seat next to the most beautiful girl in the world—and it's empty. So you take it. But now isn't then, and it'll never be calm, it'll never be peaceful. I was worried about her walking around in that blouse. Peel off her jacket, and there is the blouse. Peel off the blouse, and there is perfection. A young man will find her and take her away. And from me, who fired up her senses, who gave her her stature, who was the catalyst to her emancipation and prepared her for him.

How do I know a young man will take her away? Because I once was the young man who would have done it.

When I was younger I wasn't susceptible. Others got jealous earlier, but I was able to protect myself from that. I let them have their way, confident that I could prevail through sexual dominance. But jealousy, of course, is the trap door to the contract. Men respond to jealousy by saying, "Nobody else is going to have her. I'm going to have her—I'll marry her. I'll capture her that way. By convention." Marriage cures the jealousy. That's why many men seek it out. Because they're not sure of that other person, they get her to sign the contract: *I will not, et cetera*.

How do I capture Consuela? The thought is morally humiliating, yet there it is. I'm certainly not going to hold her by promising marriage, but how else can you hold a young woman at my age? What am I able to offer instead in this milk-and-honey society of free-market sex? And so that's when the pornography begins. The pornography of jealousy. The pornography of one's own destruction. I am rapt, I am enthralled, and yet I am enthralled *outside* the frame. What is it that puts me outside? It is age. The wound of age. Pornography in its classic form has a kick of about five or ten minutes before

it becomes kind of comical. But in this pornography the images are extremely painful. Ordinary pornography is the aestheticizing of jealousy. It takes the torment out. What—why "aestheticizing"? Why not "anesthetizing"? Well, perhaps both. It's a representation, ordinary pornography. It's a fallen art form. It's not just make-believe, it's patently insincere. You want the girl in the porno film, but you're not jealous of whoever's fucking her because he becomes your surrogate. Quite amazing, but that's the power of even fallen art. He becomes a stand-in, there in your service; that removes the sting and turns it into something pleasant. Because you're an invisible accomplice in the act, ordinary pornography takes the torment out while mine keeps the torment in. In my pornography, you identify yourself not with the satiate, with the person who is getting it, but with the person not getting it, with the person losing it, with the person who has lost.

A young man will find her and take her away. I see him. I know him. I know what he is capable of doing because he is me at twenty-five, as yet without the wife and the child; he is me in the raw, before I did what everybody else did. I see him watch her crossing the broad plaza—*striding* the plaza—at Lincoln Center. He is out of sight, behind a pillar, eyeing her as I did on the evening I took her to her first Beethoven concert. She is in boots, high leather boots and a shapely short dress, a devastating young woman out in the open on a warm autumn night, unashamedly walking the streets of the world for all to covet and admire—and she's smiling. She's happy. This devastating woman is coming to meet me. Only it isn't me in the pornographic film. It's him. It's the him who was once me but is no longer. Watching him watching her, I know in detail what is going to happen next, and knowing what is going to happen next, picturing it, it is impossible to think in what you rationally construe as your own self-interest. It is impossible to think that not everybody is feeling this way about this girl because not everybody has an obsession about this girl. Instead, you can't imagine her going anywhere. You can't imagine her on the street, in a store, at a party, on the beach without that guy emerging from the shadows. The pornographic torment: watching somebody else do it who once was you.

When you finally lose a girl like Consuela, this happens to you everywhere, all the places you ever were with her. When she's gone, it's uncanny, you'll remember her there, you'll see that space empty of you but with her as she was with you but with the twenty-five-year-old boy you are no longer. You imagine her striding like that in her shapely short dress. Coming toward you. Aphrodite. Then she is past you, she's gone, and the pornography spins out of control.

I inquire (though what good can come of my knowing?) about her boyfriends, ask her to tell me how many she slept with before me and when she started and whether she's ever been with another girl or with two boys at once (or a horse, or a parrot, or a monkey), and that was when she told me that there had been only five. However attractive, however well groomed and gorgeous, she had had relatively few boyfriends for a contemporary girl. The constraining influence of the wealthy, proper Cuban background (if, that is, she is telling the truth). And the last boyfriend was a stupid fellow student who couldn't even fuck her right, who was only concentrating on coming himself. The old stupid story. Not a man who loves women.

She was inconsistent in her morality, by the way. I remember that at that time George O'Hearn, the poet, a man married to the same woman all his life, had a girlfriend in Consuela's neighborhood, and he was there, downtown, having breakfast with his girlfriend in a coffee shop, and Consuela saw him and she was upset. She recognized him from the picture on the back of a new book of his then on the table beside my bed, and she knew that I knew him. She came to me that night. "I saw your friend

He was with a girl at eight o'clock in the morning, in a restaurant, and he was kissing her—and he's married." She was so predictably platitudinous in these things while acting independently of all convention in her affair with someone thirty-eight years her senior. Inwardly uncertain and out of her depth some of the time, that had to be; nonetheless, something special was happening to her, a big, ersatz, unforeseen something that flattered her vanity and fed her confidence and, exciting as it was, didn't appear to be turning her (as it was me) inside out.

Consuela told me, during one of my interrogations, that there was a boyfriend back in high school who used to want passionately to watch her menstruate. Whenever she started to menstruate, she was to call him, and he would come right over, and she would stand there, and he would watch the blood run down her thighs and onto the floor. "You did this for him?" I asked. "Yes." "And your family, what about your traditional family? You were fifteen years old, you couldn't stay out in the summertime after eight P.M., and yet you did this? Your grandmother a duchess," I said, "in love with her rosary, and yet you did this?" "I wasn't fifteen any longer. I was sixteen by then." "Sixteen. I see. That explains it. And how often did you do this?" "Whenever I had my period. Every month," she told me. "Who was the boy? I thought a boy couldn't even be in your room. Who was he? Who is he?"

A socially acceptable boy. Also Cuban. Carlos Alonso. Very proper, clean-cut kid, she tells me, who picked her up at the door in a suit and a tie, never honked for her at the curb, who would come in and meet her parents and sit with them, a reserved boy from a good family highly conscious of their social status. As in her own family there is lots of respect for the father, everyone is well educated, everyone is easily bilingual, the right schools, the right country club, they read *El Diario* and the *Bergen Record*, they love Reagan, love Bush, hate Kennedy, rich New Jersey Cubans to the right of Louis XIV, and Carlos calls her up and says don't menstruate without me.

Picture it. After school, the bathroom, suburban Bergen County, and the two of them transfixed by the enigma of her discharge as though they are Adam and Eve. Because Carlos is enchanted too. He too knows she is a work of art, the lucky rare woman who is a work of art, classical art, beauty in its classical form, but alive, alive, and the aesthetic response to beauty alive is what, class? Desire. Yes, Carlos is her mirror. Men have always been her mirror. They even want to watch her menstruate. She is the female magic men cannot escape. Dressed culturally in the decorous Cuban past, but her permissions flow from her vanity. Her permissions flow from looking in the mirror and saying, "Someone else must see this."

"Call me," I told her, "when you begin to menstruate. I want you to come *here*. I want to watch too."

Too. That's how unconcealed the jealousy is, how feverish the desire is—and that's how something close to disastrous happened.

Because I was meanwhile, that year, having an affair with a very attractive, very strong, responsible woman, no disabling wounds, no vices or wild views, a scrutinizing intelligence, reliable in every way, too unironic ever to be lightly witty but a sensual, expert, and attentive lover. Carolyn Lyons. Many years earlier, back in the mid-sixties, she'd been a student of mine as well. In the intervening decades, however, neither of us had gone in search of the other, and so when we

accidentally met on the street as Carolyn was walking to work one morning, we embraced and held each other as if it were a cataclysmic event like a world war (rather than her leaving for California to go to law school) that had separated us for the next twenty-four years. We each proclaimed how wonderful the other looked, laughingly recalled the mania of a night in my office when she was nineteen, said all sorts of tender things about the past, and there and then made a date for dinner the next night.

Carolyn was still beautiful, radiantly big-featured, though beneath the pale gray eyes the biggest sockets were now papery and worn, and not so much, I would think, because of her chronic insomnia but because of that compound of disappointments not uncommon to the biographies of successful professional women in their forties whose evening meals more often than not are delivered to the door of their Manhattan apartments in a plastic bag by an immigrant. And her body took up more space than it used to. Two divorces, no children, a demanding, high-paying job requiring a lot of overseas travel—all that adds up to another thirty-five pounds, and so when we went to bed, she whispered, "I'm not the same," to which I replied, "Do you think I am?" and nothing was said on that score again.

As an undergraduate, Carolyn had roomed with one of the campus firebrands, a charismatic sixties ringleader, a la Abbie Hoffman, named Janie Wyatt, a kid from Manhasset who wrote an enchanting senior thesis for me entitled "A Hundred Ways to Be Perverse in the Library." I quote the opening sentence: "The blow job in the library is the very essence of it, the sanctified transgression, the campus black mass." Janie weighed maybe a hundred pounds, no more than five feet tall, if that, a little blonde who looked as if you could pick her up and throw her around, and she was the college's dirty diva.

Carolyn back then was in awe of Janie. Carolyn used to say to me, "She has so many affairs. Simultaneously. You go to somebody's apartment, a graduate student, a young instructor, and there's Janie's underwear hanging out to dry on the handles of the shower faucets." Students who wanted sex with Carolyn would tell me, they'd be walking along the campus, they'd suddenly want sex, and they'd call her. And if she wanted it too, off they went. They'd be walking along, they'd stop in their tracks, they'd say, "I think I'm just going to call Janie," and they never made it to class. A lot of the faculty frowned at the openness of her sexual behavior and equated it with stupidity. Even some of the boys—spoke to her as a slut one moment and then went off to bed with her the next. But she was neither stupid nor a slut. Janie was someone who knew what she was doing. She stood in front of you, small as she was, with her legs slightly apart, planted, lots of freckles, blond short hair, no makeup except bright red lipstick, and her big, open confessional grin: this is what I am, this is what I do, if you don't like it, it's too bad.

How did Janie astonish me most? Many ways—in the early days of the campus revolt, there were many things to mark her as a new, noteworthy kind of creature. She astonished me, strangely, by doing something that might sound nothing like immoderate now, given the progress in boldness that women have made since, and that didn't necessarily rival the defiant flamboyance of her public stance. She astonished me most by carrying off the shyest man on the campus, our poet. The crossover between faculty and students was exciting not only for being new but for being out in the open, and accounted for more divorces than just my own. The poet was without the skills others possess in advancing their worldly interests. He marshaled his egoism for language alone. Eventually died from drink, relatively young, but, on his own in genial America, only drink could unstring this guy. Married, with two kids, bashful as could be other than up on the platform dazzlingly lecturing on poetry. To lure this man out

of the shadows was unimaginable. Except to Janie. At a party. Many students, both boys and girls, wanted to be closer to him. ~~The smart girls all had a crush on him, this romantic stranger from life,~~ but he didn't appear to trust anybody. Until Janie went up to him at a party and took his hand and said "Let's dance," and the next thing we knew she had him in tow. He seemed to swim right in to trusting her. Little Janie Wyatt: we're all equal, we're all free, we can land anything we want.

Janie and Carolyn, along with another three or four defiant upper-middle-class kids, comprised a clique calling itself the Gutter Girls. Well, these girls resembled nothing I'd ever known, and not because they were swathed in gypsy rags and barefoot. They detested innocence. They couldn't bear supervision. They weren't afraid of being conspicuous and they weren't afraid of being clandestine. To rebel against one's condition was everything. They and their adherents may well have been, historically, the first wave of American girls fully implicated in their own desire. No rhetoric, no ideology, just the playing field of pleasure opening out to the bold. The boldness developed as they realized what the possibilities were, when they realized they were no longer being watched, that they were no longer subservient to the old system or under any system of any kind—when they realized they could do anything.

It was an improvised revolution at first, the sixties revolution; the campus vanguard was tiny, half of one percent, maybe a percent and a half, but that didn't matter because the vibrating faction of society soon followed. Culture is always being led by its narrowest point, among the young women of this campus by Janie's Gutter Girls, the female trailblazers of a completely spontaneous sexual change. Twenty years earlier, in my college days, the campuses had been perfectly managed. Parietal regulations. Unquestioned supervision. The authority came from a distant Kafkaesque source—"the administration"—and the language of the administration could have come from Saint Augustine. You tried to find your wily way around all this control, but until about '64, by and large everyone under surveillance was law-abiding, members in excellent standing of what Hawthorne called "the limit-loving class." Then came the long-delayed explosion, the disreputable assault on postwar normalcy and the cultural consensus. All that was unmanageable came breaking out, and the irreversible transformation of the young had begun.

Carolyn never achieved Janie's notoriety, nor did she want to. Carolyn partook of the protest, the provocation, the insolent fun but, with characteristic self-discipline, never to the point where insubordination might jeopardize her future. Carolyn as she is now in middle age—entirely of the corporate world, uncomplainingly straight— isn't a surprise to me. Giving offense in the cause of sexual license was never Carolyn's calling. Neither was wholesale waywardness. But Janie—let me digress for a moment to Janie, in her own small-time way a Consuela Castillo's Simón Bolívar. Yes, a great revolutionary leader like the South American Bolívar, whose armies destroyed the power of colonialist Spain—an insurrectionist unafraid of battling superior forces, the *libertador* pitted against the college's reigning morality who eventually swept its authority away.

Today, the carefree sexual conduct of the well-bred girls in my class is, as far as they know, warranted by the Declaration of Independence, an entitlement that requires of them little if any courage to utilize and that is in harmony with the pursuit of happiness as conceived of at Philadelphia in 1776. In fact, the uninhibited everything that the Consuelas and the Mirandas nonchalantly take for granted derives from the audacity of the shameless, subversive Janie Wyatts and the amazing victory they achieved in the sixties through the force of atrocious behavior. The coarse dimension of American life previously captured in gangster films, that's what Janie hauled on campus, because

that's the intensity it took to undo the upholders of the norms. That's how you carried the quarrel to your keepers—in your ugly language rather than theirs.

Janie was born in the city, then raised in the suburbs, out on Long Island, in Manhasset. Her mother was a schoolteacher and commuted each day to Queens, which the family had left for Manhasset and where the mother still taught tenth grade. The father commuted in the other direction, the couple of miles to Great Neck, where he was a law partner of Carolyn's father. That's how the girls knew each other. The empty suburban house—it excites every sexual nerve in Janie's body. She comes of sexual age when the music is changing, and so she turns it on. She turns everything on. Janie's cunning was that she realized, when she got there, what the suburbs were for. She was never free in the city as a girl, never on the loose as the boys were. But out in Manhasset she found her frontier. There were next-door neighbors but they weren't as close as they were in the city. She got home from school and the streets were empty. Looked like the towns of the old Wild West. Nobody around. Everybody gone. So till they all came home on the train, she had a little operation, a little sideshow going. Thirty years later, a Janie Wyatt degenerates into an Amy Fisher, slavishly servicing the auto mechanic all on her own, but Janie was bright and a born organizer—unbroken, brazen, a sassy surfer riding the currents of change. The suburbs, where girls, safe from the dangers of the city, didn't have to be kept under tight wraps, where parents weren't too concerned on a moment-by-moment basis, the suburbs were her American finishing school. The suburbs created the agora for this education in the unsanctioned to flourish. The lessening of surveillance, the gradual giving over of space to all these kids who had been endowed by Dr. Spock with the tools of disobedience—and it flourished, all right. It grew out of control.

That was the transformation Janie wrote about in her thesis. That was the story she told. The Suburbs. The Pill. The Pill that gave parity to the woman. The Music. Little Richard propelling everything. The Pelvic Backbeat. The Car. The kids out there driving together in the Car. The Prosperity. The Commute. The Divorce. A lot of adult distraction. The Grass. Dope. Dr. Spock. All of that's what led to Lord of the Flies U, which was what the Gutter Girls called our college. Janie's was not a revolutionary cell that was blowing things up. Janie wasn't Bernadine Dohrn or Kathy Boudin. Nor were the Betty Friedmans speaking to her. The Gutter Girls had no objection to the social or the political argument, but that was the other side of the decade. There were two strains to the turbulence: there was the libertarianism extending orgiastic permission to the individual and opposed to the traditional interests of the community, but with it, often wedded to it, there was the communal righteousness about civil rights and against the war, the disobedience whose moral prestige devolves through Thoreau. And the two strains interconnecting made the orgy difficult to discredit.

But Janie's was a pleasure cell, not a political cell. And these pleasure cells existed not just on our campus but all over and by the thousands, tie-dyed boys and girls who didn't always smell so good engaging together in reckless behavior. Twist and shout, work it on out—that, not the "Internationale" was their anthem. Salacious, direct music to fuck to. Music to give head by, the people's bebop. Of course, music has always been useful sexually, within the prescribed limitations of the moment. Even Glenn Miller, back when in a song you still had to come at sex through a Tin Pan Alley romance, lubricated the situation as much as it could be. Then young Sinatra. Then the creamy saxophone. But the limitations on the Gutter Girls? They used the music the way they used the marijuana, as a propulsive, as the emblem of their mutiny, the provocation to erotic vandalism. In my adolescence, in the swing band era, there was just the booze to put you in the mood. For them there was an arsenal of all-out anti-inhibitors.

Having those girls in class was my education: seeing how they got themselves up, watching them jettison their manners and uncover their crudeness, listening to their music with them, smoking with them and listening to Janis Joplin, their Bessie Smith in whiteface, their shouter, their honky-tonk, stoned Judy Garland, listening with them to Jimi Hendrix, their Charlie Parker of the guitar, getting high with them and listening to Hendrix playing the guitar backwards, reversing everything, retarding the beat, accelerating the beat, and Janie chanting, as her doped-out mantra, "Hendrix and sex, Hendrix and sex," and Carolyn, as hers, "A beautiful man with a beautiful voice"—observing the swagger and appetite and excitement of the Janies who were without the biological terror of the erection, without the fear of the phallic transformation of the man.

The Janie Wyatts of the American sixties knew how to operate around engorged men. They were themselves engorged, so they knew how to transact business with them. The venturesome male drive, the male initiative, wasn't a lawless action requiring denunciation and adjudication but a sexual sign that one responds to or not. To control the male impulse and report it? They were not educated in that ideological system. They were far too playful to be indoctrinated with animus and resentment and grievance from above. They were educated in the instinctual system. They weren't interested in replacing the old inhibitions and prohibitions and moral instruction with new forms of surveillance and new systems of control and a new set of orthodox beliefs. They knew where the pleasure was to be had, and they knew how to give over to desire without fear. Unafraid of the aggressive impulse, deep in the transforming fracas—and for the first time on American soil since the Pilgrim women of Plymouth Colony were cloistered by an ecclesiastical government against the corruptions of the flesh and the sinfulness of men—a generation drawing their conclusions from their cunts about the nature of experience and the delights of the world.

Isn't the bolivar the unit of currency in Venezuela? Well, under America's first woman president I would hope the dollar will become the wyatt. Janie deserves no less. She democratized the entitlement to pleasure.

Sidelight. The English trading outpost at Merry Mount that so incensed the Plymouth Puritans—know about that? Fur-trading settlement, smaller than Plymouth, about thirty miles northwest of Plymouth. Where Quincy, Mass., is today. Men drinking, selling arms to the Indians, palling around with the Indians. Cavorting with the enemy. Copulating with Indian women, whose custom it was to assume the doggie position and to be taken from behind. A pagan hotbed in Puritan Massachusetts, where the Bible was law. Danced around a maypole in animal masks, worshiped at it every month. Hawthorne based a story on that maypole: Governor Endicott sent the Puritan militia under Miles Standish to cut it down, a pine tree festooned with colored banners and ribbons and antlers and roses and standing eighty feet tall. "Jollity and gloom were contending for an empire"—that's how Hawthorne understood it.

Merry Mount was presided over for a time by a speculator, a lawyer, a charismatic privileged character named Thomas Morton. He's a kind of forest creature out of *As You Like It*, a wild demon out of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare is Morton's contemporary, born only about eleven or so years before Morton. Shakespeare is Morton's rock-and-roll. The Plymouth Puritans busted him, then the Salem Puritans busted him—put him in the stocks, fined him, imprisoned him. He eventually

exiled himself to Maine, where he died in his late sixties. But he couldn't resist provoking them. He was a source of prurient fascination for the Puritans. Because if one's piety isn't absolute, it logically leads to a Morton. The Puritans were terrified that their daughters would be carried off and corrupted by this merry miscegenator out at Merry Mount. A white man, a white Indian, luring the virgins away. This was even more sinister than red Indians stealing them. Morton was going to turn their daughters into the Gutter Girls. That was the main concern other than his trading with the Indians and selling them firearms. The Puritans were frantic about the younger generation. Because once they lost their younger generation, the ahistorical experiment in dictatorial intolerance was dead. Age-old American story: save the young from sex. Yet it's always too late. Too late because they've already been born.

Twice they shipped Morton to England to be tried for disobedience, but the English ruling class and the Church of England had no use for the New England Separatists. Morton's case was thrown out of court each time, and Morton made his way back to New England. The English thought, He's right, Morton—we wouldn't want to live with him either, but he's not coercing anyone and these fucking Puritans are crazy.

In *Of Plymouth Plantation*, Governor William Bradford's book, the governor writes amply about the evils of Merry Mount, the "riotous prodigality," the "profuse excess." "They fell to great licentiousness and led a dissolute life, pouring out themselves into all profaneness." Morton's confederates he calls "mad Bacchanalians." Morton he labels "the Lord of Misrule" and the master of "a School of Atheism." Governor Bradford's a powerful ideologue. Piety knew how to write sentences in the seventeenth century. So too did impiety. Morton published a book as well, *The New English Canaan*, grounded in fascinated observation of the Indians' society—but a scurrilous book according to Bradford, because it was also about the Puritans and how they "make a great show of religion but no humanity." Morton is straightforward. Morton doesn't expurgate. You have to wait three hundred years before the voice of Thomas Morton turns up in America again, un-expurgated, as Henry Miller. The clash between Plymouth and Merry Mount, between Bradford and Morton, between rule and misrule—the colonial harbinger of the national upheaval three hundred and thirty-odd years later when Morton's America was born at last, miscegenation and all.

No, the sixties weren't aberrant. The Wyatt girl wasn't aberrant. She was a natural Mortonian in the conflict that's been ongoing from the beginning. Out in the American wildness, order will reign. The Puritans were the agents of rule and godly virtue and right reason, and on the other side was misrule. But why is it rule and misrule? Why isn't Morton the great theologian of no-rules? Why isn't Morton seen for what he is, the founding father of personal freedom? In the Puritan theocracy you were at liberty to do good; in Morton's Merry Mount you were at liberty—that was it.

And there were lots of Mortons. Mercantile adventurers without the ideology of holiness, people who didn't give a damn whether they were elect or not. They came over with Bradford on the *Mayflower*, emigrated later on other ships, but you don't hear about them at Thanksgiving, because they couldn't stand these communities of saints and believers where no deviation was allowed. Our earliest American heroes were Morton's oppressors: Endicott, Bradford, Miles Standish. Merry Mount's been expunged from the official version because it's the story not of a virtuous utopia but of a utopia of candor. Yet it's Morton whose face should be carved in Mount Rushmore. That's going to happen too, the very day they rename the dollar the wyatt.

My Merry Mount? Me and the sixties? Well, I took seriously the disorder of those relatively few years, and I took the word of the moment, liberation, in its fullest meaning. That's when I left my wife. To be accurate, she discovered me with the Gutter Girls and she threw me out. Now, there were other people on the faculty who grew their hair long and wore the far-out clothes, but they were just on furlough. They were a mix of voyeur and day-tripper. Occasionally they ventured out, but never did more than a few go over the trench into the field of engagement. But I was determined, once I saw the disorder for what it was, to seize from the moment a rationale for myself, to undo my former allegiances and my current allegiances and not to do it on the side, not to be, as many my age were, either inferior to it or superior to it or simply titillated by it, but to follow the logic of this revolution to its conclusion, and without having become its casualty.

This required some doing. Just because there's no memorial bearing the names of those who out on the rampage came to grief doesn't mean there weren't casualties. There wasn't necessarily carnage but there was plenty of breakage. This was not a pretty revolution taking place on the dignified theoretical plane. This was a puerile, preposterous, uncontrolled, drastic mess, the whole society in a huge brawl. Though there was comedy too. It was a revolution that at the same time was like the day after the revolution—a big idyll. People took off their underwear and walked around laughing. Often it was no more than farce, childish farce, but astonishingly far-reaching childish farce; often it was no more than a teenage power surge, the adolescence of the biggest, most powerful American generation ever coming into their hormones all at once. Yet the impact was revolutionary. Things forever changed.

One's skepticism, one's cynicism, the cultural-political good sense that normally kept one outside of mass movements, was a useful shield. I wasn't as high as everyone else, and I didn't want to be. For me the job was to detach the revolution from its immediate paraphernalia, from its pathological trappings and its rhetorical inanities and the pharmacological dynamite that made people jump out of windows, to sidestep the worst and to seize and use the idea, to say to oneself, What a chance this is, what an opportunity to live out my own revolution. Why rein myself in because of the accident of the fact that I was born in this year and not in that year?

People fifteen, twenty years younger than I, the privileged beneficiaries of the revolution, could afford to go through it unconsciously. There was this exuberant party, this squalid paradise of disarray, and, without thinking or having to think, they claimed it, and usually with all its trivia and trash. But I had to think. There I was, still in the prime of life and the country entering into this extraordinary time. Am I or am I not a candidate for this wild, sloppy, raucous repudiation, this wholesale wrecking of the inhibitive past? Can I master the discipline of freedom as opposed to the recklessness of freedom? How does one turn freedom into a system?

To find out cost plenty. I have a son of forty-two who hates me. We needn't go into that. The point is that the mob didn't come and open my cell door. The erratic mob was there, but as it happened, I had to open the door myself. Because I too was compliant and fundamentally thwarted, even if, while I was married, I was sneaking out of the house fucking whomever I could. That kind of sixties deliverance was what I'd had in mind from the beginning, but in the beginning, my beginning, there was nothing resembling a communal endorsement of anything like it, no social torrent to sweep you up and carry you along. There were only obstacles, one of which was one's civil nature, one of

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