

A woman wearing a maroon dress is holding an open book. The pages of the book are covered with green leaves, possibly basil. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color.

THE
WRITING
CIRCLE

~ a novel ~

Corinne Demas

The Writing Circle

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Preface

THE HOUSE IS SET ON A HILLSIDE, WITH A LONG DRIVEWAY that leads up to it and disappears around the back. It's after dinnertime, already dark. A garage door at the rear of the house opens, and a pickup truck backs out and turns around. Whoever is driving has not turned the headlights on, and if you were viewing the scene from above, you would barely make out the truck as it comes around the side of the house, as it heads down the driveway.

A figure cuts across the sloping front lawn and starts down the driveway, towards the road. It's probably a woman, but she's dressed in black, and almost invisible in the dark. A young man is standing by the house, watching her. Light spills out of the doorway behind him. He hears the pickup truck as it emerges around the corner of the house, and he turns towards the sound. Then he cries out something—the woman's name perhaps—but she does not hear him. She's halfway down the driveway, just at the point where it takes a sharp turn. He flies down the hillside, plunges towards her, towards the point of intersection.

Part One

~~Upstairs, in a room in the hospital, were a man and a woman and a dead baby. You would not realize at first, that the baby was dead. The woman had bobby pins holding her brown hair back off her face. The man wore glasses with tortoiseshell plastic frames, cloudy over the bridge of his nose. Those were the only details the doctor could bear to picture now.~~

Years later the couple would have two more children—both boys—but at the time neither they nor the young doctor had any way to know that. They would adore those sons, and anyone who hadn't known about the first child they might have had, a little girl, would think them so content as parents that they wanted for nothing. But that night, as the doctor walked out through the lobby of the hospital, the future, which would in fact hold a reasonable share of blessings, was unimaginable.

It was a small country hospital, and the doctor, who was older than he looked, had come back to the area where he had grown up to join a local practice. His parents had moved to Arizona and sold the house where he had spent the early years of his life, but he still knew people in town, though not many, since he had always been a shy kid and had gone away to boarding school and then college.

The hospital had recently opened its new wing, the result of a surprisingly successful capital campaign, and the lobby had been in use for only three weeks. It was designed along the lines of a grand hotel, with high ceilings, art deco light fixtures, and upholstered armchairs placed in conversation clusters along its length. The floor was carpeted in purple and the walls were paneled in honey-colored wood, and the effect was soothing and deceiving, though no one was entirely fooled because the smell of the hospital seeped out from the rooms and corridors beyond. It was a façade that seemed fragile, because just beyond it the real business of the hospital—carried out in rooms with white linoleum floors—seemed as if it might burst through. But that was during the day. Now, at 2:30 a.m., even that world beyond the wood veneer was quiet, too, the lights all dimmed.

A woman wheeled a carpet sweeper in front of the bank of elevators and disappeared behind a doorway. And then the lobby was absolutely still until the doctor appeared around the partition at the far end. He had changed from his scrubs into his street clothes, and he wore running shoes and a black leather jacket that didn't seem like the style of clothing a doctor would choose. From a distance, the jacket made him look like a teenager. He walked with his shoulders slung forward and his chin against his chest, and he didn't look up until he passed the glass doors of the gift shop and snack bar. He paused for a moment and looked into the room, which was illuminated only by the lights in the refrigerated unit that held juice and bottled water. It had been nearly two days since he had slept and hours since he had eaten. He ran his hand along the brass door handle, and, although he knew the door was locked, when his hand reached the end he jiggled it anyway. He leaned against the door, pressing the side of his unshaved face against the cool glass, and closed his eyes for a second.

It was clear to him that he could not go on this way. He had allowed grief to enter into a realm where grief had no place, and the result was that he could no longer function as he needed to. He was absolutely certain about this—more certain than he had been when he had decided to go to medical school, more certain than when he had completed his residency and decided to join a practice in the place where he had grown up. He was certain that he could not recover the kind of distance that he knew he needed to have, that he had trespassed into an emotional territory where even the greatest amount of resolve couldn't lead him out. He had no idea what else he would do with himself, but he knew it couldn't be this.

The revolving doors in the center of the entrance had been locked. He let himself out from the smaller door on the side. The staff parking lot was on the far side of the building, farthest from the main road. There were white pines in the lot that must have been planted when the original hospital building had been erected and now they were forest giants, several stories high. He breathed in the

building had been erected, and now they were forest giants, several stories high. He breathed in the smell of them. He walked to his car at the far end of the lot and brushed the pine needles from the windshield. He started up the car and drove out to the semicircle of road that went past the emergency room entrance and under the porte cochere outside the main lobby. He looked back at the brick front of the hospital. Most of the rooms were dark. He was certain their room was dark, the room where the couple and the dead baby were, and he counted off the floors and windows and located which one was theirs. He forced himself to look at it, but his head soon jerked as he twitched himself awake. He put on his headlights, which he had neglected to do before, and pulled out into the road that would take him home.

IT WAS THE DAY OF TESTICULAR CANCER. NANCY (A NAME that no one was given anymore) had laid out the offprints from various medical journals on her desk the night before, but she hadn't looked at any of them yet. The monthly newsletter she edited had a dozen articles an issue, and she usually spent a day collecting material for each article, and a day reading through it, boiling it down, and writing it up. The newsletter was published under the name of a university medical school, but Nancy was its major author. An editorial board of physicians at the hospital—whose names were used for PR—sometimes suggested subjects for her, but mostly it was she who came up with the topics covered each month. She kept her ear out for what people were worried about, health crises that hit the local news (like the deadly strain of *E. coli* bacteria that had contaminated baby spinach) and the usual seasonal concerns. She did articles about lower back pain when spring gardening season arrived, articles about skin cancer as summer approached, and articles about frostbite at the start of winter. She farmed out some of the work to freelance writers (she had once been one of them), but she rewrote all the articles herself. The narrative voice she had perfected was professional but jaunty. She sounded like an authority, but her tone was upbeat, even when the article was ultimately informing the reader about some hideous condition that involved suffering, disfigurement, and certain early death.

“We are not in the business of scaring people” is what the physician who had started the newsletter and hired her years before had said. “We’re in the business of informing them and helping them make wise choices about their health.”

The wise choice about testicular cancer, Nancy knew from an article she'd done a year before, was to wear boxers rather than briefs and to be wary of bicycling. But there was now some new information about tumors and heat, and it was time for a follow-up. The word *cancer* in the headline was a certain draw for readers.

She was making herself a cup of tea when the phone rang. It was Bernard.

“I’m just calling to remind you about Sunday,” he said.

“I remembered.”

“Good. It would have been embarrassing if you hadn’t shown up.”

“For you?”

Bernard laughed. “Yes. They would all have thought I had told you the wrong day. I did give you directions, didn’t I?”

“You did, Bernard.”

“But I neglected to tell you that sometimes Adam’s buzzer doesn’t work. If you ring and no one appears, go around the side of the building and tap on the window.”

“Oh come on,” said Nancy. “I’m not going to tap on windows!”

“Then if you meet me there at precisely three o’clock and the buzzer doesn’t work, *I’ll* go around and tap on the window.”

“That will be very gracious of you,” said Nancy. “By the way, I know something about all the members, except for Adam Freytoch.”

“He’s been with us only a few years. He designs running shoes for a living but has been working on a novel. He doesn’t signify.”

“Bernard!” Nancy cried. “How can you say that about someone?”

“He tries hard,” said Bernard. “But he’s very young.”

“You are cruel,” said Nancy. “You were young once, yourself.”

“Too long ago for anyone to remember,” said Bernard, so softly that Nancy couldn’t tell if the wistfulness in his voice was authentic or ironic.

“I’ll see you Sunday, then,” said Nancy.

“Yes,” said Bernard. “And no need to be worried. I’m sure they will all take to you.”

“What makes you think I’m worried?” asked Nancy.

“Because you worry,” said Bernard. “That’s the sort of person you are.”

“You don’t know me that well,” said Nancy.

“It’s in your face,” said Bernard. “Your perpetually knitted brow.” And with that he hung up.

Nancy poured the hot water onto the waiting tea bag in her mug and angled the glass cabinet door so she could see her reflection. She was someone who worried, though less so now that her daughter, Aliko, was grown, but she had never thought it was so obvious. Bernard was like that. He said disturbing things, tossed them off, and whether they were true or not, they rankled. Once after he had made a particularly blunt remark about a jacket she wore—“sadly misshapen,” she remembered he called it—she had accused him of being tactless.

“Tact, my dear,” he had replied, “is merely a ploy of the unimaginative.”

He was impossible, and she’d told him so. But she liked him, nevertheless, though she knew many people who didn’t. She couldn’t imagine being married to him, though, and she found it remarkable that two women, Virginia, in his past, and Aimee, now, had taken him on.

But he was right about her being worried. She hadn’t published anything in years, and she was afraid Bernard—to whom she had foolishly confessed she was working on something new—had pressured the others to invite her to join them. She was not anxious about Virginia, who was unfailingly kind, or Christopher Billingsley, who wrote thrillers and whom Bernard had once described as “hopelessly seeking literary approval.” But Gillian Coit was another story. Gillian was a poet who had been getting a lot of press recently. Nancy had met her twice in the past, and the second time Gillian hadn’t remembered they’d been introduced before.

Nancy rescued the tea bag from the now almost too dark tea and carried the mug to her study. It had originally been a glass-enclosed porch, an addition to the back of the antique Greek Revival house, and she had renovated it and installed a heating system. The house was large and there were other rooms that would have been more sensible to use as a study, but she liked the way this room was far from the heart of the house yet still linked to it—an extremity—like a hand from the body itself. When the snow banked up in winter, she could get to her work without putting on her boots. She was away from her domestic life but still connected. She was away from her bedroom, where she and Oates made love, and she was away from Aliko’s bedroom. When Aliko left for college, Nancy didn’t want to alter anything in the room, as if ensuring that Aliko’s departure was only temporary, yet each time Nancy passed the room and looked in, the uncharacteristic tidiness spoke only of absence.

Once, for the fun of it, Nancy had written an article on empty nest syndrome, *a condition that parents—a higher percentage of females than males—suffer when their children go away to college, particularly acute if the child in question is the person’s only progeny*, but of course she could never publish it in the medical newsletter. Although the intensity of the emotion was palpable, *not a melancholia brought about simply because of a change in the timbre of the dwelling place, but a response to a cluster of factors: loss of occupation (on-duty parent) loss of youth awareness of*

response to a cluster of factors: loss of occupation (on-duty parent), loss of youth, awareness of mortality, it was hardly a legitimate medical condition. The name conjured an image of a quizzical robin perched by a nest of twigs. Nancy could write about depression or menopause, but she knew you had no business complaining because your child had made it through high school, gotten into college and was thriving at that same college rather than hanging around under your roof.

Nancy's study was the room closest to the river, and she had a view of it, this lovely, moving body of water, from her desk. The house itself faced the road with its best front and then straggled out behind, summer kitchen, shed, added on over the decades and then incorporated into the house, one by one. The porch was the last link. From the point of view of historic preservationists, it should have been torn down, since it was tacked on in the 1920s, added by people who liked, as Nancy did, to look at the river but who didn't like to be bitten by mosquitoes while they did so. Presumably the generation that had built the original house was not so inclined. For them the river's value was utilitarian rather than aesthetic. If the original owners sat anywhere, it would have been in front of the house, so they could observe what passed on the road. The road was busier now, and cars sped by. Far at the back of the house, Nancy was protected from their noise, protected even from awareness of them.

She set her mug on her desk and settled into her chair. She started flipping through the articles awaiting her from *The Journal of the American Medical Association* and *The New England Journal of Medicine*, the *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, the *British Medical Journal*. She nudged them to the side and looked out her window—the goldenrod at the edge of the mowed field, the just orangening maples, the brown river, low after the summer.

She thought about her father and wondered how he would view what she did for a living. All those years of his secret life when he had studied and practiced medicine, delving into the peculiarities of the human body and the way it went awry, and here she was writing about medical conditions without the slightest training herself, without a single encounter with a real patient. She did not delude herself that she was doing a noble thing. Perhaps people were desperate for information like this, but she was part of an enterprise whose interests were commercial, not altruistic. And for her own part, she did it because it was a way to make a living. It was, by all accounts, an enviable job for a writer. She was paid well, and her hours were flexible. She was her own boss. And presumably she had time for her own writing—for certainly the writing she did for the health newsletter was not her own. Her own, now, was the novel about her father, which she had been working on, bit by bit, for the past year.

It wasn't really about her father, of course, it was fiction after all, but the main character was based on her father. She felt close to him, as if he were still alive, as if by writing about his youth she had given that youth back to him. And it was a way to explore the mystery of the choice her father had made in his life, the secret that had been kept from her most of her childhood. The secret that, when revealed, gave her insight into a man whom she had thought she knew.

She had had to wait until he died to write about him. She could not have intruded on the privacy of his past knowing that he would witness this intrusion. She could not bear his knowing what she imagined about him, for imagining takes a liberty with someone's life, and although her father loved her, would grant her anything, it would have embarrassed them both.

Bernard's phone call had thrown her off course this morning. It had reminded her that she had committed herself to a next step. It was one thing to probe into her father's story in the intimacy of her manuscript, in the safety of her study. It was another thing to expose it to anyone else. What was she doing laying it bare before someone like Gillian Coit?

There was a circle of brown liquid in the bottom of Nancy's mug now, but it was cold. She spun the mug around once, so the white stars blurred on the blue ceramic background, then she pushed the mug

to the back of her desk. She had to get to work now. She turned to the articles in front of her. She began reading through the stack, marking useful paragraphs with a blue felt-tipped pen and processing the information, summarizing it in a few simple sentences. *Male testes are located in the scrotum outside the body cavity because it's cooler there. When testicular cancer cells spread to parts of the body that are warmer environments (like the brain and the liver), they don't thrive as well and are therefore less resistant to the drugs that combat them. The idea of using heat to help combat cancer is already meeting some success in cases of prostate cancer.*

Who reading this would imagine its author here now, sitting with her feet tucked up under her, a woman in sweatpants and a T-shirt, a sweater with worn-out elbows slung around her neck? Who would imagine the scene from her window, the monarchs clustered on the purple asters, the river in the distance turning blue-green in the morning sunshine?

Bernard

S MALL, AND SLENDER AS A BOY, BERNARD'S WIFE, AIMEE, had struggled most of her adult life to have people take her seriously. From a distance, she looked like a child. Up close, she looked twenty rather than forty. Her voice was soft, too, a little girl's voice, though she spoke with a care and deliberateness, and when you entered into a conversation with her you thought her smarter than in fact she was. She was a quarter Japanese, a quarter French, and when it suited her, she exploited one or the other.

Bernard was inclined to clutter and messiness. His home with Virginia had been filled with old books, old sofas, and old velvet drapes. Aimee changed all that. Bernard had ended up with the house after his divorce, and Aimee transformed it when she moved in. Not so much to exorcise Virginia (she liked Virginia) or make her mark as second wife, but because the place depressed her as it was. The house was practically gutted. All the woodwork was painted white—including the mantel in the living room and the stair railing, which Bernard, in a previous life, had spent days stripping of its old paint. And the furniture was spare and modern. Aimee transformed Bernard's wardrobe as well, but when he could, he still wore the old clothes he had salvaged.

"He looks," Virginia told her husband, Joe, "like a man sitting in a furniture showroom. But he doesn't complain. He's in love with her, he'll put up with anything." Virginia smiled and shook her head. "The old fool," she added, kindly.

Bernard worked late at night—every night—and slept late in the morning. Aimee couldn't sleep past eight, and the only way she could get Bernard to come to bed before midnight was to make a bath for him, in the large, claw-footed tub, slip in behind him, and soap his broad, white back. He wouldn't return to his study after that.

He was sleeping late, as usual, this Sunday morning, and Aimee had already jogged her requisite three miles, gotten the paper and croissants, and showered before she woke him. She slipped, naked, into bed beside him and lay with half her body across his. His breath in the morning was usually a turnoff, so she avoided his mouth and instead left a trail of kisses from his ear across his cheek, down the side of his neck, settling her lips finally in the corner of his collarbone, the soft stretch of skin there when she pressed against it, seemed to have nothing below it but air.

Bernard stirred in his sleep, woke, and smiled. He reached up one hand and stroked Aimee's head. The bottom edge of her hair was wet, and he knew she had just come from the shower.

"I wish you didn't have to go anywhere," she said. "I wish we could have the whole day together."

"We have most of the day," said Bernard. His hand moved down from Aimee's head to her shoulder, to her back.

"Three. You have to be there at three. That's the middle of the afternoon."

"Sh," said Bernard. He held her against him and moved his body back and forth so her small breasts rubbed against his chest.

"Where are you meeting?"

"Adam's."

"At least that's nearby."

"Sh," whispered Bernard. His hand progressed now to Aimee's buttocks. He cupped one cheek and then moved his hand towards the center, slipping his forefinger into the fold. He pressed against her

anus. There was a moment when she began to relax and his finger started to push inside her, but her muscles tightened suddenly.

“I wanted to drive up to Cranford Orchards today,” she said. “If you have to go to Adam’s, then we better get going now or it won’t be worth driving all the way up there.”

Bernard opened his eyes. He patted Aimee and smiled. The erection, which he had nearly achieved subsided, painlessly.

“All right,” he said.

He didn’t think Aimee did this consciously, but this wasn’t the first time she had begun to arouse him on a Sunday morning only to withdraw, as if to punish him for the transgression he was about to commit: going to a meeting that she was excluded from, taking their weekend time, which she felt belonged to them rightfully as a couple, and using it for an activity that didn’t include her. She had no concern about activities he was involved in during the week. She worked at an architectural design firm and put in long hours.

She also sometimes attempted to sabotage—well, perhaps that was too strong a word—influence? his going to the meeting. A romantic encounter on an early Sunday afternoon, so he might forget about the meeting entirely (he didn’t) or an emergency that arose. Bernard never called her on this, never confronted it directly. He took her jealousy of his time away as a sign of her affection for him. He thought she was transparent, but he smiled at her in private, for he knew she would be furious if he pointed this out to her, would see it as a sign of his paternalism. He wasn’t afraid of her, but he was afraid of her anger, which was the anger of a small person, sharp and intense.

At Cranford Orchards the trees looked almost artificial, the apples round and red against all the green, like ornaments that had been placed on the branches, that could not possibly have emerged from those brown, knotty stems.

“A jubilant sight,” said Bernard as they stood on the edge of the gravel parking area, looking out at a hillside of apple trees.

“This would be a perfect place for a house,” said Aimee. “Can you imagine?”

“If there were a house here, we wouldn’t be able to stand here.”

“You say that all the time,” said Aimee, “whenever we’re somewhere with a great view. But, Bernard, wouldn’t you like to wake up in the morning and step out on a deck off your bedroom and see this?”

“I like waking up in the morning in my bedroom at home and driving up here and standing with you and looking out at the view.”

Aimee punched the side of his shoulder and started walking towards the farm-stand building. It was an old barn that had been turned into a seasonal shop, selling not just apples but, as Bernard described it, “all things apple,” including apple pies, apple butter, pot holders and dishcloths with apple print fabric, wooden apple refrigerator magnets, and stationery with apple motifs. Bernard stood studying the barn siding while Aimee darted about in the shop. Bernard was impatient with anything that resembled a gift shop, but he loved the old building, the dark wood of the inside of the barn. He did not mind that Aimee covered every piece of wood in his house with a glare of white, but he missed the grain. The nature, the origin of all the trim details of his house—the moldings and mantels and window frames—was now completely hidden. It could have all been made out of plaster.

“Should we get a bag of Macouns?” asked Aimee.

“Whatever you like, my dear,” said Bernard.

The question was somewhat rhetorical. Aimee already had the bag in her hand. In her other hand was a cluster of orange. She saw him looking at it and held it up, as if it were a bouquet.

“Japanese lanterns,” she said, smiling.

“I know.”

“We have just the vase for them.”

Bernard nodded. He had no idea what vase she was referring to, had no idea about their stock of vases—some had probably always been in the house (Virginia took few things with her), several Aimee had brought to their marriage, and one he remembered they’d received as a wedding present from some relative of his, which had pleased Aimee. They had been married by a justice of the peace in a small ceremony at home, and although Aimee had claimed at the time it was what she wanted, he sometimes wondered if she had secretly longed for a wedding with all the trappings and had hoped he would insist on it. The vase had come in an excessively large white box from some expensive store, and Aimee had opened it with excitement. He thought she saw it as a token that their union had been accepted by his family. But maybe he was reading something into it that wasn’t there, maybe it was just that she had liked the vase for its clean, crystal lines, liked it for itself.

The woman at the cash register moved her eyes from Aimee to Bernard and back again. She was, no doubt, trying to ascertain their relationship. It had happened on several occasions that someone had mistaken them for father and daughter—even though they didn’t look at all related, Aimee with her straight, nearly black hair and dark eyes and her small, taut body, and Bernard with pale eyes and curly hair that had once been blond, and a corpulent, puffy look. Aimee was particularly sensitive to this and at times like these would convey by a touch or a word something that put things straight.

Bernard started reaching into the back pocket of his baggy corduroy pants to extract his wallet, but Aimee quickly laid her credit card on the counter. “We’re all set, dear,” she said. Her voice said: *wife*.

The woman picked up the card and went about her business, and Bernard imagined what she might be thinking. His daughter, Rachel, had been fine about his marrying a woman closer to her age than Virginia’s, but he hadn’t forgotten her comment at the time.

“You’ll just have to get used to people looking at you like a cradle robber,” she’d said.

“It’s only because Aimee looks young for her age.”

“Aimee is young,” Rachel said. “She’s young enough to be your daughter.”

“Not really,” Bernard insisted.

“Daddy!” Rachel had cried, “do the math! Unless you were sexually retarded—”

“No,” said Bernard.

“Well?”

“I concede your point,” Bernard said. “You’re not angry at me, are you, Peachie?”

“Of course not,” said Rachel, and she kissed him loudly on the cheek. “You deserve to be happy. And Aimee’s fine. Even Mommy likes her.”

His son, Teddy, had been less generous. He refused to attend the wedding and, even before their more recent falling-out, adopted an injured, somewhat aggrieved air whenever they were together. Bernard guessed that Teddy thought Aimee had been seduced and pressured into marriage by Bernard (although it was quite the other way around) and that he ran her life. The rest of the world, Bernard was sure, viewed it that Aimee ran his.

Back at the house, Aimee arranged the Japanese lanterns in a clay crock Bernard wasn’t sure he’d seen before (he was certain, however, that it was not the wedding gift vase) and set it on the mantel in the room she called the library. The orange was bright against the white wall.

“What do you think?” asked Aimee.

“I like them very much,” said Bernard.

Aimee nodded, satisfied, and went back to the kitchen to lay out the luncheon food they had picked up at the deli on their way home. She had not been fishing for a compliment, Bernard knew this. Her question had been more pro forma.

Bernard stood for a while, looking at the Japanese lanterns. In the spare setting, their intricacy was remarkable. If they had been set on that mantel in the old house, they would have been lost in the midst of everything else. Bernard didn't share Aimee's taste, but he admired the conviction of it. He was more comfortable, aesthetically, with Victorianism than Modernism, but he didn't care enough about aesthetics to have it matter. And for Aimee it mattered greatly. She was passionate—obsessive Bernard sometimes thought—about her surroundings, her ambiance. She'd redesign the world, if she could.

“Did you want me to heat up the bread?” Aimee called.

“No,” said Bernard, heading to the kitchen. “It's getting late. I need to be leaving soon.”

“It was your idea to buy all this,” said Aimee.

That had been true, but it was only because Aimee had wanted to eat lunch in a restaurant and it had seemed it would take less time to pick up something and eat at the house.

Aimee had set the table in the bay window with blue place mats and blue napkins. Now she was placing the food on the glass plates. To his alarm he saw that two wineglasses had been set on the counter. He glanced at his watch surreptitiously.

“I don't think I'll have anything to drink,” he said.

“We have a half-opened Pinot Grigio,” said Aimee, and she went to the refrigerator and brought it out. “It would be so nice with the antipasto.”

“All right,” said Bernard. “A small glass, then.”

He resigned himself to a more leisurely lunch than he wanted. Towards the end he suddenly remembered that he had promised Nancy he would meet her on Adam's front porch. Even if he left right now, he would be late.

He pushed back his chair and stood up.

“I need to go,” he told Aimee. “Leave the dishes, I'll get them when I'm back.” He leaned down and kissed her on the mouth before she could speak. “I'll be back before you know it,” he said.

Virginia

VIRGINIA DIDN'T DRIVE. SOMEONE OFTEN GAVE HER A RIDE home after the meetings, saving Joe a trip, but Joe always brought her there. Virginia had attempted to get a driver's license twice, when she was young and both times she had failed. The first time it had been more the fault of the car, a broken emergency brake on a rusty Peugeot she had borrowed for the test. The second time, nervous after her aborted attempt, she had sailed through a stop sign without even touching her foot to the brake. She resigned herself to depending on public transportation or the men in her life to chauffeur her around. Bernard loved to drive, and during the decades they were married, the thought of her trying again to get a license never came up. Joe, who had not learned to drive till he was thirty-five, the consequence of growing up in New York City, where no one in his family owned a car, was an insecure driver. It was too late, Virginia thought, for her to try to get a license now. Highways frightened her, traffic made her nervous, and her night vision wasn't very good. So Joe chauffeured, stoically, pleased there was something he could do for Virginia.

They had not seen each other for fifty years when they met again, but that didn't mean they hadn't thought about each other. Joe had followed Virginia's career, bought multiple copies of all her books and read them with more care than even her editors, and written her an admiring note for each one. She treasured these notes. They were cautious and chivalrous, even after he was a widower and Virginia was divorced and there was no need for caution on either side.

They had gone to elementary school together, a progressive private school in Manhattan. The tuition had been a stretch for Joe's family. He was the only kid who had to commute from Brooklyn. Virginia's family was wealthy but bohemian, so even Joe hadn't realized at the time how rich they were. After sixth grade, they'd gone to different schools and lost touch. Joe had invited Virginia to his high school senior prom, but she was at a boarding school and hadn't been able to get to the city for it, although she had wanted to. Joe hadn't known that, had thought perhaps she hadn't really wanted to. But, oh, how she had wanted to!

"It's a miracle you're here," he told Virginia when she was seated beside him at the restaurant where their elementary school class had gathered for its reunion.

"No miracle," said Virginia. "You wrote, and made an excellent point. You said it was an event that would be unlikely to occur again. And"—she smiled—"you shamed me into it."

"Shamed you?" asked Joe.

"You made it sound as if you thought I might think myself too important to come to a reunion. Me too important! So to prove to you how ridiculous that notion was, here I am." Virginia raised her hand in emphasis, and the silver bangles on her wrist slid down and settled in a clump on the fatter part of her arm.

"I'm glad," said Joe.

"Besides," said Virginia, "I had to see what became of you."

"I went to graduate school in history," said Joe. "I ended up selling mattresses." He had flattened the white linen napkin that had been folded in a cone at his place, and now he tried, unsuccessfully, to restore it to its proper shape.

"Your family's business, right?" asked Virginia.

"You remembered that, Ginny?"

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