Going

It wasn't so hard to understand, was it? He was in love and wanted to be with her. And she owed it to him, didn't she? Hadn't she made him love her, promising that she was going to be around for a long, long time when they first met and then, after not such a very long time, leaving New York City to attend that art school in Boston? Didn't she understand the stress and strain on him to be so far away from her, and the expense of traveling all those miles by bus or train so he could have a weekend with her in her Park Drive apartment overlooking the Fenway for that year she was away? Besides, it would be good for her to have a summer job, to see how real people lived, rather than run off to her family's huge estate up there in the Catskills, as she had been doing every summer of her life. Even her mother, Lydia, said so.

Such thoughts went through Mark's mind as he stood under the shade of a honey locust tree on the West Village side street. The tree was one of many on the long block of brownstones and other small buildings, and he was grateful for the shade on a hot, humid afternoon and the respite from the bustle of Manhattan and the carpet of crud laid down by the buses and trucks on the avenues. But as he waited for Claudia to emerge from the design studio owned by a family friend in the four-story building, other less certain thoughts began to fill his mind—mainly, that he was seeking to alter the current of her life. They triggered a surge of anxiety that quickly had him in its grip. He imagined

Claudia in a state of fury for having bent to his will, and suddenly envisioned her as a powerful locomotive bursting through the building's walls and roaring right over him. Afterward he would wonder if that moment of mental weakness had been her opening to break free, if possibly his insecurity had traveled through the outer wall of the building and lodged in her mind. For if she was not a locomotive, she nevertheless emerged with a look of fury on her pretty face and tore past him without a word. Down the block she streaked, and when finally he caught up with her at the corner and reached for her shoulder, she shook free and continued on her way. Only at the entrance to the subway at Fourteenth Street and Sixth Avenue did she turn to him and say, with an emphatic quality to her words, "Look, I am an artist, not some sort of nine to five person as you would have me be. I will not do paste-ups and mechanicals all day while gray-haired men leer at me."

And with that she descended the stairs, leaving him to stare down at the hole into which she had disappeared.

He walked north along the avenue, numb to the commotion of cars and trucks and the ever-changing faces of those who, like him, trod the city's streets, while underground he heard the rumble of a train he imagined speeding his love away from him. What he really heard over the early evening tumult was the sound of his own shame, that he should have entertained for even a brief moment the thought that someone of the caliber of Claudia Van Dine would accommodate herself to the average plane of existence he had been offering her for these summer months. It was the distinct shame of one who has been put in his place.

At Thirty-third Street and Eighth Avenue, he pushed through the revolving door of a Horn and Hardart. He had a little time before his evening shift was to begin, and despite the swirl of emotions that gripped him, he could do with a cup of coffee and a piece of pie.

He moved to the rear of the automat and sat at sturdy square, two-tone brown table. The two marble steps down to the sunken main portion of the automat reminded him of a similar art deco design in the Bronx apartment of his childhood friend Marty Ballen. Where was Marty now? Probably he had gone away. Not to the war, like his Irish friends Patty Sullivan and Danny O'Brien and Mickey McConnell from the neighborhood, but to some out-of-state college his parents were paying for.

Sitting there sipping his coffee and picking at the apple pie, he felt immersed in his own history. And why not? How many Sundays throughout his childhood had he eaten here with his mother and older brother, Luke, after Sunday school and the afternoon service at the tabernacle up the street?

"Let us go for some normal food," his mother would say. Those green oval dishes of macaroni, the brown pots of baked beans with bits of bacon, both of which he drowned in ketchup; the tart cherries in the cherry pies and the delicious and moist pumpkin pie in season, all his by dropping those nickels in the slot and opening the little window compartments. And always the sweet suffusing presence of his mother, radiant and buoyed up, her troubles left behind, after the service, where, more often than not, she would have stood and spoken in the tongues of angels, as the Pentecostals called it, tears

streaming down her face. Some kind of release from the cares of the world it was for her. Some kind of buoying up of her spirit.

But then he stopped coming to the church, to his mother's sorrow. That would have been at age thirteen. He couldn't go. Too much talk of sin, and of worldliness, as if to want the world was something bad. He did want the world. He wanted the world with all his heart and soul. He wanted Mickey Mantle and Duke Snider and Willie Mays and those green fields of Yankee Stadium and the Polo Grounds and Ebbets Field. And a year later he wanted girls and he wanted beer and he wanted cigarettes, like the Marlboro he now was smoking.

What it meant, he thought, was that he was twenty now, not thirteen. What it meant was that things had changed too fast, like his body, that he should be sitting there at the great height of six foot three when six years earlier he had been five feet five. He hadn't filled in.

The post office across the street was enormous, a stolid mass of granite that stood in his mind as a symbol of enduring strength, giving full credibility to the motto chiseled into the pediment: "Neither wind nor snow nor rain nor gloom of night can stay these couriers from their appointed rounds." But his mind was not consoled by the seeming permanence of the building, not when the fragility of relationship had him in a state of emotional turmoil. Halfway up the block, he walked across a ramp spanning a deep drop to the employees' entrance, punched his time sheet, and took an elevator to the third floor, overcoming the shriek of resistance that had risen in him, as if to flee from the site was to flee from the mediocrity of his life the withdrawal of Claudia's love had revealed— this

world of mostly older men, sad sacks and losers sitting there like human automatons on their stools, slotting letters in the small compartments that bore the names of each of the fifty states.

As the hours passed and he emptied one plastic bin after another stuffed with envelopes, a sense of surrender came over him, the mindless physical activity rooting him once again to the reality of his life and providing a sense of purpose and even accomplishment. He had always worked: delivery boy for the local florist and dry cleaners, supermarket stock boy, bookstore assistant. Work was part of the fabric of his life. Work fed something in him. It promoted a feeling of joy. It had been that way since his earliest years.

He had been stunned by her vehemence, but now self-righteous anger was loud in his mind. Claudia would suffer for running away, even if he told himself that wasn't exactly what she was doing.

Some kind of industrial psychology was in play that, shaken as he was, he could work so feverishly. It was as if an unseen government eye were trained on him, checking that he was being good, as when he was a child, he would wake relieved that the clouds hadn't parted and the roll hadn't been called way up yonder, his fate sealed in the fiery pit where, as Pastor Brown said, the fires burned everlasting and hotter than gasoline. But it was simpler than that, he realized. It was the man to the left of him in the stained white T-shirt and the man to the right of him in the blue work shirt. Even the United States Post Office came down to competition, and the deathly if unexamined fear of falling behind.

It was dark when he punched the clock and filed out of the building with the other spent men from his shift. Across the street and high off the ground he saw hanging, at a right angle to the brick church, the huge neon cross glowing red in the night. As a child he would stare at the postal workers, their uniforms as gray as the granite walls of the neo-Roman structure. Could it be that they too would be consigned to the fires of hell, as would everyone not sitting in the varnished wood pews of the tabernacle? It seemed to him now that a chasm more than a street separated him from the church.

He took the steps two at a time down into the depths of the subway, the same steep stairs on which he would trail behind his mother as they ascended, so fearful was he that she would fall and fall and die and leave him in a life of endless desolation. Through the spooky, deserted maze he sprinted and up a ramp to the arcade of Penn Station, hearing his mother's voice—"you with your long legs, run and fill this prescription for me so my night will not be sleepless"—as often, in the subway, he would hear not the harmonic sound of the Beatles on *Rubber Soul* but the church hymns of his past, "Shall We Gather" and "Rescue the Perishing," and "In the Garden," his mother's favorite, or the slow, mournful sound of "The Old Rugged Cross." But what he mostly heard now, like a siren sounding, was the returning shriek of his own pain, and felt once again the merciless waves of anxiety seeking to wear him to a nub. Though he had been determined not to call, he now looked to every phone booth he passed as an agent of relief, and once the thought was there, he had no seeming power to resist.

Through frequent use, her family's number was imprinted on his brain: TRafalgar 7-0642. He closed his eyes and imagined the beige phone ringing in the vestibule of the

Riverside Drive apartment, the sound taking on his own quality of desperate neediness as it traveled from one high-ceilinged, well-appointed room after the other: her bedroom with the canopy bed looking down on the limestone cylinder of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument; the living room with its walnut shelves filled with hardbound books; the kitchen with its dazzling white surfaces and well-stocked refrigerator, or any of the others. When no one picked up,, he could only guess that Claudia had caught the last Pine Hill Trailways bus down at the Port Authority Terminal and vacated the premises as well.

Twenty minutes later he stood on the top drive of Riverside Park, the war memorial right behind him. Men young and in middle age, some in the bright plumage of summer, all with the look of penetrating hunger in their eyes, streamed past. His eyes traveled, floor by floor, up the concave curve of the building across the street. He did a careful count to seven. No air conditioners jutted from the windows. They were not needed. By early June, the family had vacated the premises for the Ulster County estate. The window of his beloved was dark, as were all the others.

Happiness had been those first few months the year before when, as a high school senior at the Dalton School, Claudia Van Dine loved everything about him, from his unmanageable hair to the Coke bottle he used for an ashtray in his little room. What a joyful thing it had been to hear a beautiful, talented girl say, as she did at a peace march in Central Park, "I'm going to be with you for a long time," and for him to be able to reply, with the lofty wisdom of a nineteen-old college sophomore, "Well, let's take this slow."

What Mark hadn't anticipated, in those months of pleasure, was the obsession that could mar and erode love. The pain of a four-year high school relationship was behind him, and if some of the torment was not forgotten, it did not occur to him that such pain could visit him again. He was older. He knew too much. He didn't foresee that those carefree, blissful days would pass and that his old insecurity would find him again, that he would be rushing home to his little room to be sure she didn't come and go. He hadn't foreseen her leaving New York for Boston and that the upper hand would go to her after that brief halcyon period, or that she would never relinquish it.

The days passed slowly. He carried his desolation with him onto the City College campus, where he took a summer course on the American novel, reading post-World War Two writers such as Mailer and Ellison and Bellow. He had dropped a couple of courses during the spring semester. He had become frightened, anxious (that word again). Claudia hadn't been answering her phone in Boston when he called from phone booths around the city, having given the operator some company credit card number his roommate had gotten hold of. If he didn't touch base with her every day, that could only mean she was moving away from him. It was something he couldn't contemplate, the idea of going through a day without speaking to her. She began to remark upon it.

He had things to learn from her. Her dedication, for one. The way she would spend hours at her easel working, just working, rattling the brushes against the coffee cans filled with turpentine. It was a centered quality, as if she was right there within herself. She was like that girl Dylan sang about, an artist who had no need to look back. He didn't have that center. He didn't have that peace and assurance. She was his center.

So now it was summer and he was trying to catch up. Falling behind was what you never wanted to do. It meant a weight too heavy to contemplate. It meant death. Even so, Claudia was too strong for the burnished prose of these novelists he had been assigned. Her face shone on every page. Not even the radiant sunlight on the green lawn of the South campus could take away the pain.

He had another job several days a week as part of the college's work-study program. Some hotshot kid from Dartmouth managing the project back at the little office. Standing there in his seersucker jacket and bowtie and sticking these pushpins in a map of the area as if were a war campaign he was leading and not a project destined for burial in some municipal hall archives. Sending the troops out into the scorched streets around Herald Square with paper and pen to count up the number of residential buildings and the number of units in each building. Mark recording the "data" but really wanting to throw it in the trash can but you didn't because it was your job, some kind of a test of your competence, like the post office job and the courses you took. The more brutal the sun the harsher the voice of anger within him. Those parents of hers—what did they know of work, with their life of leisure? A father who lived off Claudia's mother's inherited wealth and sat home and wrote books that no one bought or even read. Well, they would see, all of them.

Then later that week she called. Just like that. She was sorry. She missed him. Would he come up that weekend? The call, her voice—like a magic wand they were, causing his fear and anger to vanish and this feeling of love and being loved to surge.

The bus practically emptied at Woodstock. From his window seat he stared out at the Dutch Reformed Church and its sharp steeple, and at the lush greensward in front of it, long-haired kids lolling with their stuffed backpacks. A feeling of fragile good fortune enveloped him to know what they didn't, that twenty miles northeast was Camp, as the Van Dines called it—acre after acre of cared-for land. He wasn't one of the hippie hordes, in spite of his long hair. He somehow knew that. There were things he wanted—order, security. Chaos is what he had come from.

The bus pulled away, leaving behind the peaceful streets, and passed through wisps of towns—Bearsville and Shady and Willow and Mt. Tremper—along winding Route 212. Through the trees and down the embankment he could see fishermen in their waders, creels slung over their shoulders, patiently fly fishing for trout and striped bass.

Claudia was waiting for him at the bottom of the road in the open-top jeep. The country air had softened her face. Gone was the look of peeve she had shown on that West Village street. As she turned the jeep around, he saw a trailer on the plot of land by the main road, where the bus had stopped. A hardscrabble sort of property, with neglected sullen kids. A large dog, tethered to an oak tree, was frantically barking and straining at its leash. The dog held his gaze for the brief time it was in his view.

Claudia downshifted smoothly as the jeep came to a steep section of road.

"I'm sorry I rushed off in that way last week, but I just couldn't stay. It was just the wrong place to be, with these friends of Mommy starting to push themselves on me."

"I understand. I do," he said. And he did. He was capable of adjustment. Things took a while. That was all.

The property was about two miles up the dirt road. A brook ran on one side of it, and above rose the dark green mountains. Along the way they came to the caretaker Everett's house, a study in casual neglect, the white paint flaking from the clapboard exterior. A door-less refrigerator stood on the front porch and there was a rusting tractor on the crabgrass lawn. Everett was a bear of a man with a long family tie to the land. He hunted for deer in season and fished the streams and seldom came up empty. He lived alone, unfettered, as if nature was his only lover. It wasn't nature he abused, only the things that were set down upon it.

Two five-foot stone columns framed the driveway. There was Everett, at the wheel of the red mower, circling the green lawn. His pear-shaped body looked comically big for the little mower, as if he were a grownup in one of those bumper cars from the Coney Island days of Mark's childhood.

And in the flowerbed that bordered the lawn knelt Lydia, in her loose blue work shirt tied at the waist and her baggy khaki shorts. She stood up and waved with her free hand, a trowel in the other.

Claudia's bedroom looked out on the driveway and the front lawn. A small bathroom separated it from the master bedroom, which had its own entrance. "I'll be back in a while. I just want to finish up in my studio," she said. .She pushed through the screen door. He stood there watching as she stepped out onto the front porch, the door snapping back with authority. A studio. A woodshed. A barn that had been renovated to serve as guest quarters, when flocks of their New York City friends arrived for long weekends. A

garage. A main house. A swimming pool. A solarium. A meadow. A lean-to. A whole side of a mountain.

A mental picture came to him of Claudia in her little rented room in Boston, standing at her easel through the morning and afternoon, her brush in hand, not breaking for either food or drink. She was the same way with the books she devoured. She had an energy and intensity that cancelled out everything but the thing in front of her.

A night table separated the two beds. The previous summer he had moved the beds together. That same summer her parents had a phone extension installed because of the frequency of his calls. Still shiny black, it sat there on the table as a symbol of his dependency.

Feeling drowsy, he lay down on the bed next to the window. When he awoke Claudia was straddling him, her bowl-cut blond hair falling down over her forehead but not so he couldn't see her big green eyes. Her gaze was less clinical than amused, daring him to resist the pull of her full nakedness—that smooth, sun-kissed skin, those full, pouty lips, just the thin feminine amplitude of her.

"Come to mama, baby," she whispered. They made love quickly, the way it always seemed to happen, with her remaining on top. He came too soon, though it was never her way to complain.

Peeking through the drawn curtain Mark saw Claudia's father, stripped to his khaki shorts and sturdy boots, pushing an empty wheelbarrow along the driveway. His bronzed body was still lean and his full head of hair still blond. Mark remembered the shock of recognition the year before back at the rooming house where he was staying.

There had been a knock at the door, and when Mark opened it, he saw standing there a man who, from his facial features, could only be Claudia's father. And he remembered as well her father's words: "I have come for my daughter." No words of introduction. Just that simple statement. Not that Claudia hadn't been pushing her luck, staying out late with Mark on school nights.

"Something amazing has happened. I'm just so happy," Claudia said. The mail had been forwarded from the city. Just that afternoon, even as he was sleeping, it had arrived, she said. She had gotten in. She had gotten in. Yes, she repeated the words twice. She had applied for acceptance to the summer art program in Maine, but with little hope that she would be accepted. But they wanted her, they wanted her. Those words, wanted her, wanted her, were his, as got in, got in, were hers, but they were all one word, whatever word that was for someone who got more and more and more as he got less and less and less.

"And when does all this happen?"

"Tomorrow. Daddy drives me up tomorrow," she said, still straddling him, her hands pressed down on his chest. "Can you believe it? It will be so good for my work."

She got dressed before him, shedding her painter's pants for a pair of brown bellbottoms, and again was out the door. He lingered for a while, staring at the photos that covered the rough wood wall above the bed. There was a wedding picture of Claudia's parents, Lydia in a flowing white gown and her father in a tuxedo and her father's father in the background wearing a top hat. And then other photos of deceased relatives, enough of their history there in the frames to tell him that they were in touch

with their lineage. Mark thought of his own relatives. He had never met any of them. His mother had been raised on a farm outside Stockholm. Her father had died of drink, as she called it. His father was an Armenian, born in Turkey, in 1901. His father didn't have a past that he could show in pictures or even talk about. He had Mark's mother. His father said he didn't know what would have happened to him if he hadn't found her.

"Van likes the release of physical work after nine intense months of writing at his desk in the city. Nature restores the balance between the cerebral and the physical. It gives us the vigor we need for the demands of a full cultural and social life during the fall and winter months in New York City." Lydia's chores were behind her. Fresh from the shower and in her evening clothes—a pair of red dress slacks and a short-sleeved yellow top—she sat there in the cozy living room with her Agatha Christie mystery and a drink. Mark watched as she drew on her Tareyton. Her mouth was wide. A gash of a mouth, really, like that of Joe E. Brown, the character actor in *Some Like It Hot.*

She had given him this idyllic picture before, not that he hadn't seen it with his own eyes. Long summer days. Drinks before dinner. A dip in the pool. Dinners up at the lean-to on the side of the mountain or down at Deanie's Restaurant in Woodstock. Visits with friends, equally cultured and blessed, with second homes away from their New York City base.

"Yes," he said. He sat opposite her on the other sofa. He really couldn't say anymore. The pain was too great. Claudia's news had been too much for him, like a second gunshot wound to the chest.

“Claudia says you are doing wonderful things down in the city, that you have two jobs and are taking summer classes as well. We so admire your energy and drive.” She had drawn him to her with the warmth she brought to a room. It was her ability to recognize you, to make you feel important, even special. A Spartan woman, he had heard Van call her. A woman who could endure much. The early death of her father, a suicide, and of her mother, strapped to an iron lung. Raised here in this very house by her dowager grandmother and an alcoholic homosexual uncle who abandoned her for days on European trips. A generous woman looking for love and looking to give love.

“School is not so very much,” he said, feeling the need to offer a corrective. “It’s just a course on post-World War Two American literature.” And just a course at the City College of New York, not Harvard, he didn’t say.

“And what about the fall? Have you declared a major?”

“Well, English, I suppose.” The previous year Claudia had made a face when he told her he was taking political science courses. “You’re too bright for that. You should be studying literature,” she had said. And so he did, allowing her to shape him, to give him a sense of direction.

“Have you thought of applying for one of those Woodrow Wilson fellowships?’

“Well, no. Actually, I don’t really know what they are. Maybe I can look into that.”

“You should,” she said. “They’re for bright and deserving students such as yourself.”

Her words only deepened his embarrassment and discomfort. Didn't she know that students with B averages didn't receive fellowships? Why was she talking to him this way? There was something different about her manner. He could hear it in her voice. It felt like she was pushing him toward a cliff, the way Claudia had been pushing him toward a cliff back when she was pursuing him and seeing him in an idealized way, as some romantic loner, a nineteenth century Russian poet suffering for his art in that cruddy little room in the single room occupancy. Forcing him to turn to her one day, right there in that room, and say, from desperation, because he couldn't go on, "You're looking at me the wrong way. You don't know who I am if you are saying all these things. I'm ordinary. That's all there is to it." Because he had to say that. He had to.

His behavior had not been good the summer before when he had been their guest for two weeks. You didn't show a girl that you needed her more than she needed you—you were only setting yourself up for a blow if you did that. It was their world, beautiful as it was, not his. It was their power, not his. Whole days—bright, sunny days— he had spent shut away in Claudia's room, succumbing to his sense of deprivation and injury. He lived to hear Claudia's footsteps, as when he was a child he would long to hear his mother's footsteps approaching his room, where he sat fuming because she hadn't paid sufficient attention to him. Making his mother come to him and ask why he wasn't at the dinner table and turning her away once and then twice until she would begin to cry, and then he would cry, the ritual having to play out before he could receive the food she had prepared and that he had been denying himself.

At first Claudia came to him, as his mother had years before, asking what was wrong, but he was too stymied by his own rage to say and didn't even know. Only knew that he was frightened of this world and ill-equipped to deal with life when it wasn't on his terms. Only knew that she would find him out and leave him. His whole life a protest at being born empty and deficient, that others should be given so much and he so little, physically and mentally and in every way that mattered. "I'm leaving," he would say, to get the jump on her inevitable leaving, and pack his bag and start off across the little wooden bridge over the stream and down the hollow road at night, praying that as he came closer to the main road he would hear the jeep behind him and the headlights. And in three tests of her love, she came through. She did come after him with the jeep. The fourth time he was on his own. He stepped out on the main road to hitch a ride, but when a car pulled onto the shoulder, he walked back up the hollow and surrendered himself to her and cried and knew the bliss of surrender for a short time afterward, the bliss that followed all that inner storm. Napalm shower, DMZ ,body count, NVA, Vietcong, Claymore, Huey. The war was in him. It was the only war he had time for.

"Choose life, Mark. Choose life," Lydia said to him that summer.

And then the summer passed, and in the fall there was the two-month trip to the Europe that Claudia took with her mother, and the night, to Claudia's horror, her mother left her in Paris bistro so Claudia could have the experience of a French lover as Lydia had had in her youth. And then in January she enrolled in the art school, Boston posing a different kind of threat than had Rome and Florence and Venice and Paris and the other major European cities on their itinerary. Now it would not be the anonymous stranger

who would possess her for a night. Now it would be a talented and handsome classmate of hers who would easily push him aside.

"I used to look forward to the new school year with great enthusiasm. I couldn't wait to get my hands on the course bulletin. I'm sure you will, too, as the fall draws near," Lydia said, as she worked on her second old fashioned, a sweet drink favored by Van as well.

"Yes. Well, maybe. Right now it seems a ways away," Mark said. Her words made him uncomfortable, as if they were meant to promote his fear and anxiety until he would shatter and be done with. He resented her power, the protection money gave her. He felt that she was not on his side, that she was cleverly and ruthlessly moving Claudia away from him. And the smile on her face, communicating that she knew more than he ever would, as he was sure she did. All those nature books on the shelves. There wasn't a wildflower or a bird she couldn't put a name to.

"I remember my first affair while I was at Radcliffe. I stood on the library steps and this beautiful young man came up to me and talked in this sweet, compelling way and drew me right into his life." She sank lower on the sofa as she spoke, as if seduced by the memory itself.

Van appeared, his long hair still wet and slicked straight back over his head, a few power strokes of the comb baring his weathered face to the world. He stood in front of the fireplace, his legs slightly spread. In one hand he held a drink, in the other a lit Tareyton.

"Well, young man, it's been a while," Van said. He looked nautical, his shoes and pants and shirt as white as the Chrysler station wagon he drove was black.

"Yes, it has been," Mark said, watching as Van flicked an ash from his cigarette back into the dormant fireplace.

Young man. The words sounded less affectionate than impersonal and distancing. And if Mark was expecting more of an exchange, it didn't happen.

"We should probably get going," Van said, looking at his watch.

Within minutes there was the crunch of tires on gravel, the almost musical rumble of the boards as the car crossed the little bridge, and then they were cruising down Route 28. Van was sort of like a ship captain at the helm with the heavy weight of silent concentration that he brought to driving, as if it were not a simple exercise in moving from point A to point B but some complex activity that he wasn't to be distracted from by idle words.

The restaurant had a small bar. Mark's eye went to the couple of solitary men having their drinks and smoking and to the bartender, a middle-aged man with a pasty face and slicked down brown hair. He seemed to have a compulsion to wipe the surface of the bar clean, to keep everything under control. Life seemed to be about that, keeping things under control. Van keeping the car under control and he, Mark, trying to keep Claudia under control, a girl just too strong for the ropes he tied around her.

"Well, here's a toast to our wonderfully talented daughter," Van said, raising his glass. It was a manner of speaking Mark hadn't heard before he had met Claudia's father,

playful and emphatic at the same time. The way well-bred men were supposed to talk, he sensed.

"Oh, Daddy," Claudia said. She had changed, moved closer to her father. The year before she had been full of scorn, calling him a closet homosexual and shocking Mark with a graphic caricature of him naked and parading around the estate, carrying his penis with both hands, as if it were the size and weight of an elephant's trunk. Evidently, full nudity had been the norm for her father, at least on the estate, in her growing-up years. Whether in love or hate they were clearly bonded, as she was so much in his image.

"And a toast to Mark as well, for all that he is doing down in New York City," Lydia said, having properly read the look of envy that had crept over his face. And so he had to suffer the mocking humiliation of her insincere attention as they raised their glasses once more.

"Yes, we've been hearing good things about you, young man," Van said.

That mode of address again.

"Mark was beginning to tell me all about his summer studies, but I didn't get a chance to hear about his job. Could you tell us a little more?"

Feeling put on the spot by Lydia, he told them, with self-deprecation as his shield, about the survey work he was doing. He left out the mental activity that accompanied his daily task, his mind brimming with judgment of them as he trudged about the steamy city.

"Isn't that just typical of the waste and inefficiency of city government. Of all governments, for that matter. Elected officials are entirely owned by business interests

and are mere agents of the greed of the corporations that run this country." The words hissed out of Van.

The capitalist oligarchy who ruled America was a recurrent theme of Van's, some deep groove in the record the needle tended to get stuck on. As a guest, Mark had often witnessed the morning ritual of Claudia's father pacing in front of the stone fireplace while holding forth to Lydia, seated on the sofa, the two of them still in their bathrobes. Lydia reduced to saying, "Yes, Poody. I see your point, Poody," in response to what, from its recurrent theme, sounded like an obsessive tirade about the real nature of the American political system and how it had always been a mere front for business interests. And yet, to Mark, there seemed no easy way to ask why a man with a substantial income from a thick portfolio of investments should be such a vehement critic of the system he so obviously benefited from.

"Oh, but Poody, aren't we being a bit extreme?" Lydia's frowning protest had a note of helplessness, as of a spectator witnessing a mighty flood..

"Anyone who tells the truth in this society is labeled extreme," Van replied, but not without humor.

When the check came, Mark took out his wallet.

"You're an industrious young man. You'll need your money for the new school year," Van said.

And so, as always, he succumbed easily to their largesse.

The next morning Mark watched from the porch as Van loaded the back of the station wagon with Claudia's things—suitcases and boxes of paints and drawing pads and four small unfinished self-portraits in oil that Claudia would be working on up in Maine. Maine. He had almost gone to school up there, a college called Bates. But the money. It was a shock to find that his family had none for college tuition. And what about his girlfriend Jane? If he went away, what would it mean for her and for him? To just up and leave his girlfriend? No, no, it was better the way it worked out, she leaving him, not for college, but to live in France with a cousin.

"Can I help?" he called to Van. But Van hadn't seemed to hear him. Besides, it was clear that Van didn't need any help. Van was expert at packing, methodical and exact about that as he was about driving and so much else.

"I know you're upset. I wish I could help you," Claudia said, touching his arm.

He watched as she opened the passenger-side door and got into the front seat. The car arced along the driveway. He watched until it was out of sight.

"I'm not as sure of myself behind the wheel as Van is." There was apology in Lydia's voice and she looked lost in the grayness of middle age in the morning light. The jeep had lurched forward, then stalled out, as she tried to slip the vehicle into gear and out of the garage. But she had better luck the second time. The engine again shook to life with a turn of the ignition key and crept slowly from its enclosed space. Even so, Lydia's self-assurance of the night before did not return. He remembered Van saying that when he had first met Lydia back in Cambridge, he discovered a shoe in the ice box of the apartment

she shared with a college roommate. Mark had heard him to mean that she was not a woman who thrived on her own. And Claudia was scornful of her mother for not moving forward with an acting career, though there had been early success. Seeing Lydia's stricken expression, Mark could see why. She was frightened of the world. She needed things to hold onto, just as he did.

As she drove him to the bottom of the unpaved road, where he would wait for the bus that would return him to his life in New York City, he took note of the pair of swings attached to the thick, sturdy branch of the old oak tree and the perfect lawn and felt the softness of the country air as a kind of caressing friend.

"Yes. He's a great driver. Very focused," Mark said, mocking, at least in his mind, the ludicrous standard of excellence Claudia's father supposedly set. He pictured Van fleeing, with a manic yet controlled frenzy that had him rigid at the wheel, with his precious human cargo.

"Van is complicated. He cannot bear to position himself behind the average mind. That partially explains his intensity when driving. He passes so much because he can't be boxed in by mediocrity."

"Yes," Mark said.

A question was forming itself in his mind. Like the jeep itself as it sped along the unpaved road, the question seemed to be developing a momentum of its own. And when Lydia braked to a halt at the turn-on to Route 28, it flew from his mouth, defining him as a child in his own mind for all time.

"Do you think I've been good for Claudia?"

Lydia drew on the cigarette she had lit. “Oh, Mark, you’ve been very good for her. Why, Van and I are always remarking on what a change has come about in her in the time that you have been seeing each other. She has become a much more confident girl. She is an extremely creative and self-aware girl with a great appetite for life, and now she has marshaled the necessary strength so she is in a position to go out and embrace it.”

The leashed dog he had seen just the day before was back to barking. A big angry dog of no pedigree. The barking seemed to be for Mark’s ears alone and was far louder than Lydia’s words.

“Do you hear that dog?” Mark said. “That dog has no play in it. That is a dog with a serious intent.”

Lydia drew again on her cigarette and touched his arm, as Claudia had done. “What I am saying is that we cannot hold back the development of another without holding ourselves back.” The words emerged with the exhaled smoke.

“Tell me you don’t hear that ferocious pooch.”

“All I am saying, dear, is that she will be seeing a great many people. I say this knowing how painful it might be for you, who have been so devoted and close, to endure. You might find yourself unable to handle such a development.”

He stepped out of the jeep, focused on what the moment had given him. The dog seemed to be calling to him, and it was for him to heed the call. He walked onto the crabgrass lawn that looked, without the defense of trees, onto Route 28. The dog was now excited beyond all measure, way up on its hind legs. Mark kept to his course, wondering

how close he'd have to come before the dog filled his eye so it was the only thing that he could see.