

THE NEW YORKER

FICTION

WENLOCK EDGE

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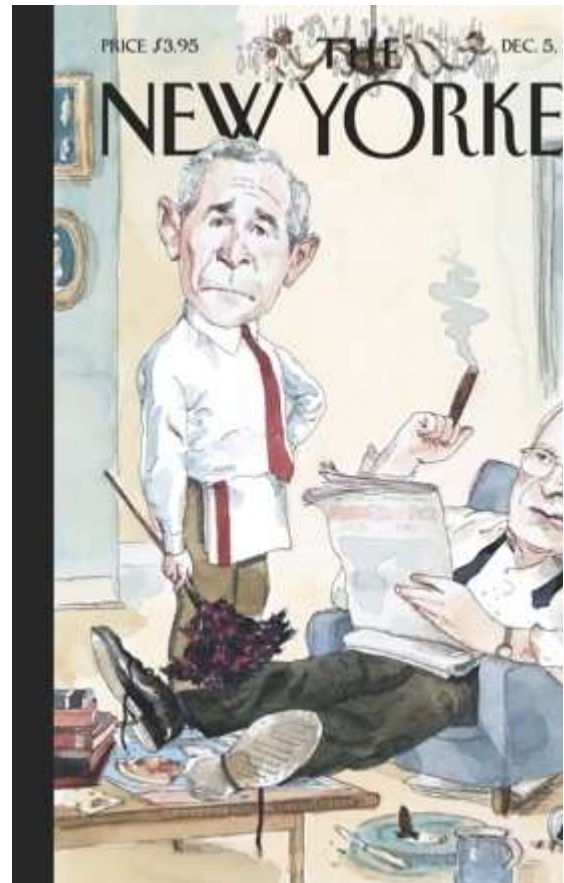
My mother had a bachelor cousin a good deal younger than her, who used to visit us on the farm every summer. He brought along his mother, Aunt Nell Botts. His own name was Ernie Botts. He was a tall, florid man with a good-natured expression, a big square face, and fair curly hair springing straight up from his forehead. His hands, his fingernails were as clean as soap itself; his hips were a little plump. My name for him—when he was not around—was Earnest Bottom. I had a mean tongue.

But I meant no harm. Or hardly any harm.

After Aunt Nell Botts died Ernie did not come to visit anymore, but he always sent a Christmas card.

When I started college in the city where he lived, he began a custom of taking me out to dinner every other Sunday evening. He did this because I was a relative—it's unlikely that he even considered whether we were suited to spending time together. He always took me to the same place, a restaurant called the Old Chelsea, which was on the second floor of a building, looking down on Dundas Street. It had velvet curtains, white tablecloths, little rose-shaded lamps on the tables. It probably cost more, strictly speaking, than he could afford, but I did not think of that, having a country girl's notion that all men who lived in the city, wore a suit every day, and sported such clean fingernails had reached a level of prosperity where indulgences like this were a matter of course.

I always ordered the most exotic offering on the menu—chicken vol au vent or duck à l'orange—while he always ate roast beef. Desserts were wheeled up to the table on a dinner wagon: a tall coconut cake, custard tarts topped with strawberries, even out of season, chocolate-coated pastry horns full of whipped cream. I took a long time choosing, like a five



-year-old trying to decide between flavors of ice cream, and then on Monday I had to fast all day, to make up for such gorging.

Ernie looked a little too young to be my father. I hoped that nobody from the college would see us and think that he was my boyfriend.

He inquired about my courses, and nodded solemnly when I told him, or reminded him, that I was in Honors English and Philosophy. He didn't roll his eyes at the information, the way people at home did. He told me that he had a great respect for education and regretted that he hadn't had the means to continue, after high school. Instead, he had got a job working for the Canadian National Railway, as a ticket salesman. Now he was a supervisor.

He liked serious reading, he said, but it was not a substitute for a college education.

I was pretty sure that his idea of serious reading would be the Condensed Books of the *Reader's Digest*, and to get him off the subject of my studies I told him about my rooming house. In those days, the college had no dormitories—we all lived in rooming houses or in cheap apartments or in fraternity or sorority houses. My room was the attic of an old house, with generous floor space and not much headroom. But, being the former maid's quarters, it had its own bathroom. Two other scholarship students, who were in their final year in Modern Languages, lived on the second floor. Their names were Kay and Beverly. In the high-ceilinged but chopped-up rooms of the ground floor lived a medical student who was hardly ever home, and his wife, Beth, who was home all the time, because they had two very young children. Beth was the house manager and rent collector, and she was often feuding with the second-floor girls over the way they washed their clothes in the bathroom and hung them there to dry. When Beth's husband, Blake, was home he sometimes had to use that bathroom because of all the baby stuff in the one downstairs, and Beth said that he shouldn't have to cope with stockings and other intimate doodads in his face. Kay and Beverly retorted that use of their own bathroom had been promised when they moved in.

Why did I choose to tell this to Ernie, who flushed and said that they should have got it in writing?

Kay and Beverly were a disappointment to me. They worked hard at Modern Languages, but their conversation and preoccupations seemed hardly different from those of girls who worked in banks or offices. They did their hair up in pincurls and polished their fingernails on Saturdays, because that was the night they had dates with their special boyfriends. On Sundays, they had to soothe their faces with lotion because of the whisker-burns the boyfriends had inflicted on them. I didn't find either boyfriend in the least desirable and I wondered how they could.

They said that they had once had some crazy idea of working as interpreters at the United Nations but now they figured they would teach high school, and with any luck get married.

They gave me unwelcome advice.

I had got a job in the college cafeteria. I pushed a cart around collecting dirty dishes and wiping the tables clean.

They warned me that this job was not a good idea.

“You won’t get asked out if people see you at a job like that.”

I told Ernie about this and he said, “So, what did you say?”

I told him that I’d said I wouldn’t want to go out with anybody who would make such a judgment, so what was the problem?

Now I’d hit the right note. Ernie glowed; he chopped his hands up and down in the air.

“Absolutely right,” he said. “That is absolutely the attitude to take. Honest work. Never listen to anybody who wants to put you down for doing honest work. Just go right ahead and ignore them. Keep your pride. Anybody that doesn’t like it, you tell them they can lump it.”

This speech of his, the righteousness and approval lighting his large face, the jerky enthusiasm of his movements, roused the first doubts in me, the first gloomy suspicion that the warning might have some weight to it after all.

When I got home that night, there was a note from Beth under my door, asking to talk to me. I guessed that it would be about my hanging my coat over the bannister to dry, or making too much noise on the stairs when Blake (sometimes) and the babies (always) had to sleep in the daytime.

The door opened on the scene of misery and confusion in which it seemed that all Beth’s days were passed. Wet laundry—diapers and smelly baby woollens—was hanging from ceiling racks; bottles bubbled and rattled in a sterilizer on the stove. The windows were steamed up, and the chairs were covered with soggy cloths and soiled stuffed toys. The bigger baby was clinging to the bars of a playpen and letting out an accusing howl—Beth had obviously just set him in there—and the smaller one was in a high chair, with some mushy pumpkin-colored food spread like a rash across his mouth and chin.

Beth peered out from all this with a tight expression of superiority on her small flat face, as if to say that not many people could put up with such a nightmare as well as she could, even if the world wasn’t generous enough to give her the least bit of credit.

“You know when you moved in,” she said, then raised her voice to be heard over the bigger baby’s cries, “when you moved in I mentioned to you that there was enough space up there for two?”

Another girl was moving in, she informed me. The new girl would be there Tuesdays to Fridays, while she audited some courses at the college.

“Blake will bring the daybed up tonight. She won’t take up much room. I don’t imagine she’ll bring many clothes—she lives in town. You’ve had it all to yourself for six weeks now, and you’ll still have it that way on weekends.”

No mention of any reduction in the rent.

N

ina actually did not take up much room. She was small, and thoughtful in her movements—she never bumped her head against the rafters, as I did. She spent a lot of her time sitting cross-legged on the daybed, her brownish-blond hair falling over her face, a Japanese kimono loose over her childish white underwear. She had beautiful clothes—a camel-hair coat, cashmere sweaters, a pleated tartan skirt with a large silver pin—the sort of clothes you would see in a magazine layout, under the headline “Outfitting Your Junior Miss for Her New Life on Campus.” But the moment she got back from the college she discarded her costume for the kimono. I also changed out of my school clothes, but in my case it was to keep the press in my skirt and preserve a reasonable freshness in my blouse or sweater, so I hung everything up carefully. Nina tossed her clothes anywhere. I ate an early supper at the college as part of my wages, and Nina always seemed to have eaten, too, though I didn’t know where. Perhaps her supper was just what she ate all evening—almonds and oranges and a supply of little chocolate kisses wrapped in red or gold or purple foil.

I asked her if she didn’t get cold, in that light kimono.

“Unh-unh,” she said. She grabbed my hand and pressed it to her neck. “I’m permanently warm,” she said, and in fact she was. Her skin even looked warm, though she said that was just a tan, and it was fading. And connected with this skin warmth was a particular odor that was nutty or spicy, not displeasing but not the odor of a body that was constantly bathed and showered. (Nor was I entirely fresh myself, owing to Beth’s rule of two baths a week.)

I usually read until late at night. I’d thought that it might be harder to read, with someone else in the room, but Nina was an easy presence. She peeled her oranges and chocolates; she laid out games of solitaire. When she had to stretch to move a card she’d sometimes make a little noise, a groan or grunt, as if complaining about this slight adjustment of her body but taking pleasure in it, all the same. Otherwise she was content, and curled up to sleep with the light on whenever she was ready. And because there was no special need for us to talk we soon began to talk, and tell about our lives.

Nina was twenty-two years old and this was what had happened to her since she was fifteen:

First, she had got herself pregnant (that was how she put it) and married the father, who wasn’t much older than she was. This was in a town somewhere outside Chicago. The name of the town was Laneyville, and the only jobs there were at the grain elevator or fixing machinery, for the boys, and working in stores, for the girls. Nina’s ambition was to be a hairdresser but you had to go away and train for that. Laneyville wasn’t where she had always lived—it was where her grandmother lived, and she lived with her grandmother because her father had died and her mother had got married again and her stepfather had kicked her out.

She had a second baby, another boy, and her husband was supposed to have a job lined up in another town so he went off there. He was going to send for her but he never did. So she left both children with her grandmother and took the bus to Chicago.

On the bus she met a girl named Marcy, who, like her, was headed for Chicago. Marcy knew a man there who owned a restaurant and she said he would give them jobs. But when they got to Chicago and located the restaurant it turned out that the man didn't own it—he'd only worked there and he'd quit some time before. The man who did own it had an empty room upstairs and he let them stay there in return for their cleaning the place up every night. They had to use the ladies' room in the restaurant but they weren't supposed to spend too much time there in the daytime—they had to wash themselves at night.

They didn't sleep hardly at all. They made friends with the barman in the place across the street—he was a queer but nice—and he let them drink ginger ale for free. They met a man there who invited them to a party and after that they got asked to other parties and it was during this time that Nina met Mr. Purvis. It was he, in fact, who gave her the name Nina. Before that, she had been June. She went to live at Mr. Purvis's place in Chicago.

She waited a little while before bringing up the subject of her boys. There was so much room in Mr. Purvis's house that she was hoping they could live with her there. But when she mentioned it Mr. Purvis told her that he despised children. He did not want her to get pregnant, ever. But somehow she did, and she and Mr. Purvis went to Japan, to get her an abortion.

At least up until the last minute that was what she thought she would do, but then she decided, no. She would go ahead and have the baby.

"All right," he said. He would pay her way back to Chicago, but from then on she was on her own.

She knew her way around a bit by this time, and she went to a place where they looked after you till the baby was born, and you could have it adopted. It was born and it was a girl and Nina named her Gemma and decided to keep her, after all.

She knew another girl who had had a baby in this place and kept it, and she and this girl made an arrangement that they would work shifts and live together and raise their babies. They got an apartment that they could afford and they got jobs—Nina's in a cocktail lounge—and everything was all right. Then Nina came home just before Christmas—Gemma was eight months old—and found the other mother half drunk and fooling around with a man, and the baby, Gemma, burning up with fever, too sick to even cry.

Nina wrapped her up and took her to the hospital in a cab. Traffic was all snarled up because of Christmas, and when she finally got there they told her that it was the wrong hospital, for some reason, and sent her off to another hospital. On the way there, Gemma had a convulsion and died.

Nina wanted to have a real burial for Gemma, not just have her put in with some old pauper who had died (that was what she'd heard happened to a baby's body when you didn't have any money), so she went to Mr. Purvis. He was nicer to her than she'd expected, and he paid for the casket and the gravestone with Gemma's name, and after it was all over he took Nina back. He took her on a long trip to London and Paris and a lot of other places, to cheer

her up. When they got home he shut up the house in Chicago and moved here. He owned some property out in the country nearby; he owned racehorses.

He asked her if she would like to get an education, and she said she would. He said she should just sit in on some courses to see what she'd like to study. She told him that she'd like to live part of the time the way ordinary students lived, and he said he thought that that could be arranged.

Hearing about Nina's life made me feel like a simpleton.

I asked her what Mr. Purvis's first name was.

"Arthur."

"Why don't you call him that?"

"It wouldn't sound natural."

Nina was not supposed to go out at night, except to the college for certain specified events, such as a play or a concert or a lecture. She was supposed to eat lunch and dinner at the cafeteria. Though, as I said, I don't know whether she ever did. Breakfast was Nescafé in our room, and day-old doughnuts I brought home from the cafeteria. Mr. Purvis did not like the sound of this but he accepted it as part of Nina's imitation of the college student's life—as long as she ate a good hot meal once a day and a sandwich and soup at another meal, and this was what he thought she did. She always checked what the cafeteria was offering, so that she could tell him she'd had the sausages or the Salisbury steak, and the salmon or the egg-salad sandwich.

"So how would he know if you did go out?"

Nina got to her feet, with that little sound of complaint or pleasure, and padded over to the attic window.

"Come here," she said. "And stay behind the curtain. See?"

A black car, parked not right across the street but a few doors down. A streetlight caught the gleaming white hair of the driver.

"Mrs. Winner," Nina said. "She'll be there till midnight. Or later, I don't know. If I went out, she'd follow me and hang around wherever I went, then follow me back."

"What if she went to sleep?"

"Not her. Or if she did and I tried anything she'd be awake like a shot."

Just to give Mrs. Winner some practice, as Nina put it, we left the house one evening and took a bus to the city library. From the bus window we watched the long black car having to slow and dawdle at every bus stop, then speed up to stay with us. We had to walk a block to the library, and Mrs. Winner passed us and parked beyond the front entrance, and watched us—we believed—in her rearview mirror.

I wanted to see if I could check out a copy of "The Scarlet Letter," which was required for one of my courses. I could not afford to buy one, and the copies at the college library

were all checked out. Also I wanted to take a book out for Nina—the sort of book that showed simplified charts of history.

Nina had bought the textbooks for the courses she was auditing. She had bought notebooks and pens—the best fountain pens of that time—in matching colors. Red for Pre-Columbian Civilizations, blue for the Romantic Poets, green for Victorian and Georgian English Novelists, yellow for Fairy Tales from Basile to Andersen. She sat in the back row at every lecture, because she thought that that was the proper place for her. She spoke as if she enjoyed walking through the Arts Building with the throng of other students, finding her seat, opening her textbook at the specified page, taking out her pen. But her notebooks remained empty.

The trouble was, as I saw it, that she had no pegs to hang anything on. She did not know what Victorian meant, or Romantic, or Pre-Columbian. She had been to Japan, and Barbados, and many of the countries in Europe, but she could never have found those places on a map. She wouldn't have known whether the French Revolution came before or after the First World War.

I wondered how these courses had been chosen for her. Had she liked the sound of them? Had Mr. Purvis thought that she could master them? Or had he perhaps chosen them cynically, so that she would soon get her fill of being a student?

While I was looking for the book I wanted, I caught sight of Ernie Botts. He had an armful of mysteries, which he was picking up for an old friend of his mother's. He had told me that he always did that, just as he always played checkers, on Saturday mornings, with a crony of his father's out in the War Veterans' Home.

I introduced him to Nina. I had told him about her moving in, but nothing about her former or even her present life.

He shook Nina's hand and said that he was pleased to meet her and asked at once if he could give us a ride home.

I was about to say no, thanks, we'd take the bus, when Nina asked him where his car was parked.

"In the back," he said.

"Is there a back door?"

"Yes, yes. It's a sedan."

"No, I meant in the library," Nina said. "In the building."

"Yes. Yes there is," Ernie said, flustered. "I'm sorry, I thought you meant the car. Yes. A back door in the library. I came in that way myself. I'm sorry." Now he was blushing, and he would have gone on apologizing if Nina had not broken in with a kind laugh.

"Well, then," she said. "We can go out the back door. So that's settled. Thanks."

Ernie drove us home. He asked if we would like to detour to his place, for a cup of coffee or a hot chocolate.

"Sorry, we're sort of in a rush," Nina said. "But thanks for asking."

"I guess you've got homework."

"Homework, yes," she said. "We sure do."

I was thinking that he had never once asked me to his house. Propriety. One girl, no. Two girls, O.K.

No black car across the street, when we said our thanks and good nights. No black car when we looked out the attic window. In a short time, the phone rang, for Nina, and I heard her saying, on the landing, "Oh, no, we just went in the library and got a book and came straight home on the bus. There was one right away, yes. I'm fine. Absolutely. Night-night." She came swaying and smiling up the stairs. "Mrs. Winner's got herself in hot water tonight."

One morning, Nina did not get out of bed. She said she had a sore throat, a fever. "Touch me."

"You always feel hot to me."

"Today I'm hotter."

It was a Friday. She asked me to call Mr. Purvis, to tell him that she wanted to stay here for the weekend.

"He'll let me. He can't stand anybody being sick around him—he's a nut that way."

Mr. Purvis wondered if he should send a doctor. Nina had foreseen that, and told me to say that she just needed to rest, and she'd phone him, or I would, if she got any worse.

"Well, then, tell her to take care," he said, and thanked me for phoning, and for being a good friend to Nina. And then, as an afterthought, he asked me if I would like to join him for Saturday night's dinner. He said he found it boring to eat alone. Nina had thought of that, too.

"If he asks you to go and eat with him tomorrow night, why don't you go? There's always something good to eat on Saturday nights—it's special."

The cafeteria was closed on Saturdays. The possibility of meeting Mr. Purvis both disturbed and intrigued me.

So I agreed to dine with him—he had actually said "dine." When I went back upstairs, I asked Nina what I should wear. "Why worry now? It's not till tomorrow night."

Why worry, indeed? I had only one good dress, the turquoise crêpe that I had bought with some of my scholarship money, to wear when I gave the valedictory address at my high-school commencement exercises.

Mrs. Winner came to get me. Her hair was not white but platinum blond, a color that to me certified a hard heart, immoral dealings, and a long bumpy ride through the sordid back alleys of life. Nevertheless, I opened the front door of the car to ride beside her, because I thought that that was the decent and democratic thing to do. She let me do this, standing beside me, then briskly opened the back door.

I had thought that Mr. Purvis would live in one of the stodgy mansions surrounded by acres of lawns and unfarmed fields north of the city. It was probably the racehorses that had made me think so. Instead, we travelled east through prosperous but not lordly streets, past brick and mock-Tudor houses with their lights on in the early dark and their Christmas lights already blinking out of the snowcapped shrubbery. We turned in at a narrow driveway between high hedges and parked in front of a house that I recognized as “modern” by its flat roof and long wall of windows and the fact that the building material appeared to be concrete. No Christmas lights here, no lights of any kind.

No sign of Mr. Purvis, either. The car slid down a ramp into a cavernous basement garage; we rode an elevator up one floor and emerged into a hallway that was dimly lit and furnished like a living room, with upholstered straight-backed chairs and little polished tables and mirrors and rugs.

Mrs. Winner waved me ahead of her through one of the doors that opened off this hallway, into a windowless room with a bench and hooks around the walls. It was just like a school cloakroom, except for the polish on the wood and the carpet on the floor. “Here is where you leave your clothes,” Mrs. Winner said.

I removed my top boots. I stuffed my mittens into my coat pockets. I hung my coat up. Mrs. Winner stayed with me. There was a comb in my pocket and I wanted to fix my hair, but not with her watching. And I did not see a mirror.

“Now the rest,” she said.

She looked straight at me to see if I understood, and, when I appeared not to (though, in a sense, I did—I understood but hoped I had made a mistake), she said, “Don’t worry, you won’t be cold. The house is well heated throughout.”

I did not move to obey, and she spoke to me casually, as if she could not be bothered with contempt. “I hope you’re not a baby.”

I could have reached for my coat, at that point. I could have demanded to be driven back to the rooming house. I could even have walked back on my own. I remembered the way we had come and, though it would have been cold, it would have taken me less than an hour.

“Oh, no,” Mrs. Winner said, when I still did not move. “So you’re just a bookworm. That’s all you are.”

I sat down. I removed my shoes. I unfastened and peeled down my stockings. I stood up and unzipped then yanked off the dress in which I had delivered the valedictory address with its final words of Latin. *Ave atque vale*.

Still covered by my slip, I reached back and unhooked my brassiere, then somehow hauled it free of my arms and around to the front to be discarded. Next came my garter belt, then my panties—when they were off I balled them up and hid them under the brassiere. I put my feet back into my shoes.

“Bare feet,” Mrs. Winner said, sighing. It seemed that the slip was too tiresome for her to mention, but after I had again taken my shoes off she said, “Bare. Do you know the meaning of the word? *Bare*.”

I pulled the slip over my head, and she handed me a bottle of lotion and said, “Rub yourself with this.”

It smelled like Nina. I rubbed some on my arms and shoulders, the only parts of myself that I could touch, with Mrs. Winner standing there watching, and then we went out into the hall, my eyes avoiding the mirrors, and she opened another door and I went into the next room alone.

It had not occurred to me that Mr. Purvis might be waiting in the same naked condition as myself, and he was not. He wore a dark-blue blazer, a white shirt, an ascot scarf (though I did not know it was called that at the time), and gray slacks. He was hardly taller than I was, and he was thin and old, mostly bald, with wrinkles in his forehead when he smiled.

It had not occurred to me, either, that the undressing might be a prelude to rape, or to any ceremony but supper. (And indeed it was not, to judge by the appetizing smells in the room and the silver-lidded dishes on the sideboard.) But why hadn't I thought of such a thing? Why wasn't I more apprehensive? It had something to do with my ideas about old men. I thought that they were not only incapable, owing to their unsavory physical decline, but too worn down—or depressed—by their various trials and experiences to have any interest left. I wasn't stupid enough to think that my being undressed had nothing to do with the sexual uses of my body, but I took it more as a dare than as a preliminary to further trespass, and my going along with it finally had more to do with pride or some shaky recklessness than with anything else. And that word. “Bookworm.”

Here I am, I might have wished to say, in the skin of my body which does not shame me any more than the bareness of my teeth. Of course that was not true, and in fact I had broken out in a sweat, but not for fear of any violation.

Mr. Purvis shook my hand, making no sign of awareness that I lacked clothing. He said that it was a pleasure for him to meet Nina's friend. Just as if I were somebody Nina had brought home from school. Which, in a way, was true. An inspiration to Nina, he said I was.

“She admires you very much. Now, you must be hungry. Shall we see what they've provided for us?”

He lifted the lids and set about serving me. Cornish hens, which I took to be pygmy chickens, saffron rice with raisins, various finely cut vegetables fanned out at an angle and preserving their color more faithfully than the vegetables that I regularly saw. A dish of muddy-green pickles and a dish of dark-red preserve.

“Not too much of these,” Mr. Purvis said of the pickles and the preserve. “A bit hot to start with.”

He ushered me back to the table, turned again to the sideboard and served himself sparingly, and sat down.

There was a pitcher of water on the table, and a bottle of wine. I got the water. Serving me wine in his house, he said, would probably be classed as a capital offense. I was a little disappointed, as I had never had a chance to drink wine. When Ernie and I went to the Old Chelsea, he always expressed his satisfaction that no wine or liquor was served on Sundays. Not only did he refuse to drink, on Sunday or on any other day, but he disliked seeing others do it.

“Now, Nina tells me,” Mr. Purvis said, “Nina tells me that you are studying English Philosophy, but I think it must be English *and* Philosophy, am I right? Because surely there is not so great a supply of English philosophers?”

In spite of his warning, I had taken a dollop of green pickle on my tongue and was too stunned to reply. He waited courteously while I gulped down water.

“We start with the Greeks. It’s a survey course,” I said, when I could speak.

“Oh yes. Greece. Well, who is your favorite Greek so far—Oh, no, just a minute. It will fall apart more easily like this.”

There followed a demonstration of how to separate and remove the meat from the bones of a Cornish hen—nicely done, and without condescension, rather as if it were a joke we might share. “Your favorite?”

“We haven’t got to him yet—we’re doing the pre-Socratics,” I said. “But Plato.”

“Plato is your favorite. So you read ahead, you don’t just stay where you’re supposed to? Plato. Yes, I could have guessed that. You like the cave?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, of course. The cave. It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

When I was sitting down, the most flagrant part of me was out of sight. If my breasts had been tiny and ornamental, like Nina’s, I could have been almost at ease. Instead, they were large and lollypop; they were like bald night creatures dumbfounded by the light. I tried to look at him when I spoke, but against my will I suffered waves of flushing. When this happened, I thought I sensed his voice changing slightly, becoming more soothing and politely satisfied, as if he’d just made a winning move in a game. But he went on talking nimbly and entertainingly, telling me about a trip he had made to Greece. Delphi, the Acropolis, the famous light that you didn’t believe could be true but was true, the bare bones of the Peloponnesus.

“And then to Crete—do you know about the Minoan civilization?”

“Yes.”

“Of course you do. Of course. And you know the way the Minoan ladies dressed?”

“Yes.”

I looked into his face this time, his eyes. I was determined not to squirm away, not even when I felt the heat on my throat.

“Very nice, that style,” he said almost sadly. “Very nice. It’s odd the different things that are hidden in different eras. And the things that are displayed.”

Dessert was vanilla custard and whipped cream, with bits of cake in it, and raspberries. He ate only a few bites of his. But, after failing to settle down enough to enjoy the first course, I was determined not to miss out on anything rich and sweet, and I fixed my appetite and attention on every spoonful.

He poured coffee into small cups and invited me to drink it in the library.

My buttocks made a slapping noise, as I loosened myself from the sleek upholstery of the dining-room chair. But this was almost covered up by the clatter of the delicate coffee cups on the tray, in his shaky old grasp.

Libraries in houses were known to me only from books. This one was entered through a panel in the dining-room wall. The panel swung open without a sound, at a touch of his raised foot. He apologized for going ahead of me, as he had to do when he carried the coffee. To me it was a relief. I thought that the back of the body—not just mine but anyone’s—was the most beastly part.

When I was seated in the chair he indicated, he gave me my coffee. It was not as easy to sit here, out in the open, as it had been at the dining-room table. That chair had been covered with smooth striped silk but this one was upholstered in some dark plush material, which prickled me, setting off an intimate agitation.

The light in this room was brighter and the books lining the walls seemed more prying and reproving than the dim dining room, with its landscape paintings and light-absorbing panels.

For a moment, as we moved from one room to the other, I’d had some notion of a story—the sort of story I’d heard of but that few people then got the chance to read—in which the room referred to as a library would turn out to be a bedroom, with soft lights and puffy cushions and all manner of downy coverings. But the room we were in was plainly a library. The reading lights, the books on the glass-enclosed shelves, the invigorating smell of the coffee. Mr. Purvis pulling out a book, riffling through its leaves, finding what he wanted.

“It would be very kind if you would read to me. My eyes are tired in the evenings. You know this book?”

“ ‘A Shropshire Lad.’ ”

I knew it. In fact, I knew many of the poems by heart.

“And may I ask you please—may I ask you please—not to cross your legs?”

My hands were trembling when I took the book from him.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes.”

He chose a chair in front of the bookcase, facing me.

“Now—”

“ ‘On Wenlock Edge the wood’s in trouble,’—”

The familiar words and rhythms calmed me down. They took me over. Gradually I began to feel more at peace.

The gale, it plies the saplings double,
It blows so hard, 'twill soon be gone:
To-day the Roman and his trouble
Are ashes under Uricon.

Where was Uricon? Who knew?

It wasn't really that I forgot where I was or whom I was with or in what condition I sat there. But I had come to feel somewhat remote and philosophical. The thought came to me that everybody in the world was naked, in a way. Mr. Purvis was naked, though he wore clothes. We were all sad bare creatures. Shame receded. I just kept turning the pages, reading one poem and then another, then another. Liking the sound of my voice. Until to my surprise and almost to my disappointment—there were still wonderful lines to come—Mr. Purvis interrupted me. He stood up; he sighed.

"Enough, enough," he said. "That was very nice. Thank you. Your country accent is quite suitable. Now it's my bedtime."

I handed him the book. He replaced it on the shelf and closed the glass doors. The country accent was news to me. "And I'm afraid it's time to send you home."

He opened another door, into the hallway I had seen so long ago, at the beginning of the evening. I passed in front of him and the door closed behind me. I may have said good night. It is even possible that I thanked him for dinner, and that he spoke to me a few dry words (*not at all, thank you for your company, it was very kind of you, thank you for reading Housman*) in a suddenly tired, old, crumpled, and indifferent voice. He did not lay a hand on me.

The same dimly lit cloakroom. The turquoise dress, my stockings, my slip. Mrs. Winner appeared as I was fastening my stockings. She said only one thing to me, as I was ready to leave. "You forgot your scarf."

And there indeed was the scarf I had knitted in Home Economics class, the only thing I would ever knit in my life. I had come close to abandoning it, in this place.

As I got out of the car, Mrs. Winner said, "Mr. Purvis would like to speak to Nina before he goes to bed. If you would remind her."

But there was no Nina waiting to receive this message. Her bed was made up. Her coat and boots were gone. A few of her clothes were still hanging in the closet.

Beverly and Kay had both gone home for the weekend, so I ran downstairs to see if Beth had any information. "I'm sorry," Beth, whom I never saw sorry about anything, said. "I can't keep track of all your comings and goings." Then, as I turned away, "I've asked you several times not to thump so much on the stairs. I just got Christopher to sleep."

I had not made up my mind what I would say to Nina when I got home. Would I ask her if she, too, was required to be naked in that house—if she had known perfectly well what sort of an evening was waiting for me? Or would I say nothing and wait for her to ask me?

And, even then, would I say innocently that I'd eaten Cornish hen and yellow rice, and that it was very good? That I'd read from "A Shropshire Lad"?

Would I just let her wonder?

Now that she was gone, none of this mattered. The focus was shifted. Mrs. Winner phoned after ten o'clock—breaking another of Beth's rules—and when I told her that Nina was not there she said, "Are you sure of that?"

She said the same thing when I told her that I had no idea where Nina had gone. "Are you sure?"

I asked her not to phone again till morning, because of Beth's rules and the babies' sleep, and she said, "Well. I don't know. This is serious."

When I got up in the morning, the car was parked across the street. Later, Mrs. Winner rang the bell and told Beth that she had been sent to check Nina's room. Even Beth was quelled by Mrs. Winner, who looked all around our room, in the bathroom and the closet, even shaking out a couple of blankets that were folded on the closet floor.

I was still in my pajamas, writing an essay on "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," and drinking Nescafé.

Mrs. Winner said that she had phoned the hospitals, to see if Nina had been taken ill, and that Mr. Purvis himself had gone out to check several other places where she might be.

"If you know anything, it would be better to tell us," she said. "Anything at all."

Then as she started down the stairs she turned and said in a voice that was less menacing, "Is there anybody at the college she was friendly with? Anybody you know?"

I said that I didn't think so.

I had seen Nina at the college only a couple of times. Once, she was walking down the lower corridor of the Arts Building, in the crush between classes, probably on her way to a class of her own. The other time, she was in the cafeteria. Both times she was alone. It was not particularly unusual to be alone when you were hurrying from one class to another but it was a little strange to sit alone with a cup of coffee in the cafeteria at quarter to four in the afternoon, when that space was practically deserted. She sat with a smile on her face, as if to say how pleased, how privileged, she felt to be there, how alert and ready she was to respond to the demands of this life—as soon as she understood what they were.

In the afternoon it began to snow. The car across the street had to move, to make way for the snowplow. When I went into the bathroom and caught the flutter of Nina's kimono on its hook on the door, I finally felt what I had been suppressing—a true fear for Nina. I could see her, disoriented, weeping into her loose hair, wandering around in the snow in her white underwear instead of her camel-hair coat, though I knew perfectly well that she had taken the coat with her.

The phone rang just as I was about to leave for my first class on Monday morning.

"It's me," Nina said, in a rushed warning, but with something like triumph in her voice. "Listen. Please. Could you please do me a favor?"

"Where are you? They're looking for you."

"Who is?"

"Mr. Purvis. Mrs. Winner."

"Well, you're not to tell them. Don't tell them anything. I'm here."

"Where?"

"Ernest's."

"Ernest's?" I said. "*Ernie's*?"

"Sh-h-h. Did anybody there hear you?"

"No."

"Listen, could you please, please get on a bus and bring me the rest of my stuff? I need my shampoo. I need my kimono. I'm going around in Ernest's bathrobe. You should see me—I look like an old woolly brown dog. Is the car still outside?"

I went and looked.

"Yes."

"O.K. then, you should get on the bus and ride up to the college just like you normally do. And then catch the bus downtown. You know where to get off. Dundas and Richmond. Then walk over here. Carlisle Street. Three sixty-three. You know it, don't you?"

"Is Ernie there?"

"No, dum-dum. He's at work. He's got to support us, doesn't he?"

Us? Was Ernie to support Nina and me?

No. *Ernie and Nina*. Ernie was to support Ernie and Nina.

Nina said, "Oh, please. You're the only friend I've got."

I did as directed. To fool Mrs. Winner, I stuffed Nina's things into my satchel. I caught the college bus, then the downtown bus. I got off at Dundas and Richmond and walked west to Carlisle Street. The snowstorm was over, the sky was clear, it was a bright, windless, deep-frozen day. The light hurt my eyes and the fresh snow squeaked under my feet.

Half a block north, on Carlisle Street, I found the house where Ernie had lived with his mother and father and then with his mother and then alone. And now—how was it possible?—with Nina.

The house looked exactly as it had when I had gone there once or twice with my mother. A brick bungalow with a tiny front yard, an arched living-room window with an upper pane of colored glass. Cramped and genteel.

Nina was wrapped, just as she had said, in a man's brown woolly tasselled dressing gown, with the manly but innocent Ernie smell of shaving cream and Lifebuoy soap.

She grabbed my hands, which were stiff with cold inside my mittens.

"Frozen," she said. "Come on, we'll get them into some warm water."

"They're not *frozen*," I said. "Just freezing."

But she went ahead and helped me off with my things, and took me into the kitchen and ran a bowlful of water, and then as the blood returned painfully to my fingers she told me how Ernest (Ernie) had come to the rooming house on Saturday night. He was bringing a magazine that had a lot of pictures of old ruins and castles and things that he thought might interest me. She got herself out of bed and came downstairs, because, of course, he would not go upstairs, and when he saw how sick she was he said she had to come home with him so that he could look after her. Which he had done so well that her sore throat was practically gone and her fever completely gone. And then they had decided that she would stay here. She would just stay with him and never go back to where she was before.

She seemed unwilling even to mention Mr. Purvis's name.

"But it has to be a big huge secret," she said. "You're the only one to know. Because you're our friend and you're the reason we met."

She was making coffee. "Look up there," she said, waving at the open cupboard. "Look at the way he keeps things. Mugs here. Cups and saucers here. Every cup has got its own hook. Isn't it tidy? The house is just like that all over. I love it.

"You're the reason we met," she repeated. "If we have a baby and it's a girl, we could name it after you."

I held my hands round the mug, still feeling a throb in my fingers. There were African violets on the windowsill over the sink. His mother's order in the cupboards, his mother's houseplants. The big fern was probably still in front of the living-room window, and the doilies on the armchairs. What Nina had said, in regard to herself and Ernie, seemed brazen and—especially when I thought of the Ernie part of it—abundantly distasteful.

"You're going to get married?"

"Well."

"You said if you have a baby."

"Well, you never know, we might have started that without being married," Nina said, ducking her head mischievously.

"With Ernie?" I said. "With *Ernie*?"

"Well, there's *Ernie*," she said. "And then there's *Er-nest*." She hugged the bathrobe around herself. "Might be something happening already, you never know."

"What about Mr. Purvis?"

"What about him?"

"Well, if it's something happening already, couldn't it be his?"

Everything about Nina changed. Her face turned mean and sour. "*Him*," she said with contempt. "What do you want to talk about him for? He never had it in him."

"Oh? What about Gemma?"

"What do you want to talk about the past for? Don't make me sick. That's all dead and gone. It doesn't matter to me and Ernest. We're together now. We're in love now."

In love. With Ernie. Ernest. Now.

“O.K.,” I said.

“Sorry I yelled at you. Did I yell? I’m sorry. You’re our friend and you brought me my things and I appreciate it. You’re Ernest’s cousin and you’re our family.”

She slipped behind me and her fingers darted into my armpits and she began to tickle me, at first lazily and then furiously.

“Aren’t you? Aren’t you?”

I tried to get free but I couldn’t. I went into spasms of suffering laughter and wriggled and cried out and begged her to stop. Which she did, when she had me quite helpless, and both of us were out of breath.

“You’re the ticklishes person I ever met,” she said.

I had to wait a long time for the bus, stamping my feet on the pavement. When I got to the college, I had missed my second class, as well as the first, and I was late for my work in the cafeteria. I changed into my green cotton uniform in the broom closet and pushed my mop of black hair (the worst hair in the world for showing up in food, the manager had warned me) under a cotton snood.

I was supposed to get the sandwiches and salads out on the shelves before the doors opened for lunch, but now I had to do it with an impatient line of people watching me.

I thought of what Beverly and Kay had said, about spoiling my chances with men, marking myself off in the wrong way. How scornful I’d been when they said it, but maybe they’d been right, after all. It appeared that, except in examinations, I got many things wrong.

After I’d finished cleaning up the cafeteria tables, I changed back into my ordinary clothes and went to the college library to work on my essay.

An underground tunnel fed from the Arts Building to the library, and on bulletin boards around the entrance to this tunnel were posted advertisements for movies and restaurants and used bicycles and typewriters, as well as notices for plays and concerts. The Music Department announced that a free recital of songs composed to fit the poems of the English country poets would be presented on a date that had now passed. I had seen this notice before, and did not have to look at it to be reminded of the names: Herrick, Housman, Tennyson. A few steps into the tunnel the lines began to assault me:

On Wenlock Edge the wood’s in trouble.

Had he known? Had he known that I would never think of those lines again without feeling the prickle of the upholstery on my bare haunches? The sticky prickly shame. A far greater shame it seemed now than at the time. He had got me, in spite of myself.

From far, from eve and morning
And yon twelve-winded sky,
The stuff of life to knit me
Blew hither: here am I.

No.

What are those blue remembered hills,
What s

pires, what farms are those?

No, never.

White in the moon the long road lies
That leads me from my love.

No. No. No.

I would always be reminded of what I had done. What I had agreed to do. Not been forced, not ordered, not even persuaded. Agreed to do.

Nina would know. She would be laughing about it. Not cruelly, but just the way she laughed at so many things. She would always remind me.

Nina and Ernie. In my life from now on.

The college library was a high beautiful space, designed and built and paid for by people who believed that those who sat at its long tables in front of open books—even those who were hungover, sleepy, resentful, and uncomprehending—should have space above them, panels of dark gleaming wood around them, high windows bordered with Latin admonitions through which to look at the sky. For a few years before they went into schoolteaching or business or began to rear children, they should have that. And now it was my turn and I would have it, too.

“Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.”

I was writing a good essay. I would probably get an A. I would go on writing essays and getting A's because that was what I could do. The people who awarded scholarships, who built universities and libraries, would continue to dribble out money so that I could do it.

People like Mr. Purvis.

Still, those dribbles, that charity, did not make me amount to anything in their eyes. What I was doing here did not really matter. Somehow I had not known that. Nina knew it now and probably she had always known it. Ernie, too, though he had thought it his duty to pretend otherwise. Mr. Purvis and Mrs. Winner. Even Beth and Kay and Beverly knew that you had to get a footing somewhere else. This was only a game.

And I had thought it was the other way round.

Just as I had made myself believe that it was a challenge with Mr. Purvis and that I had won, or come off equal.

Equal?

Nina did not stay with Ernie for even one week. One day he came home and found her gone. Gone her coat and boots, her lovely clothes and the kimono that I had brought over. Gone her taffy hair and her tickling and the extra warmth of her skin and the little *unh-unhs* when she moved. All gone with no explanation, not a word on paper.

Ernie was not one, however, to shut himself up and mourn. He said so, when he phoned to tell me the news and check on my availability for Sunday dinner. We climbed the stairs to the Old Chelsea and he commented on the fact that this was our last dinner before the Christmas holidays. He helped me off with my coat and I smelled Nina's smell. Could it still be on his skin?

No. The source was revealed when he passed something to me. Something like a large handkerchief.

"Just put it in your coat pocket," he said.

Not a handkerchief. The texture was sturdier, with a slight ribbing. An undershirt.

"I don't want it around," he said, and by his voice you might have thought that it was just underwear in general that he did not want around, never mind that it was Nina's and smelled of Nina.

He ordered the roast beef, and cut and chewed it with his normal efficiency and polite appetite. I gave him the news from home, which as usual at this time of year consisted of the size of the snowdrifts, the number of blocked roads, the winter havoc that gave us distinction.

After some time, Ernie said, "I went round to his house. But there was nobody in it."

"Whose house?"

"Her uncle's," he said. He knew which house it was, because he and Nina had driven past it, after dark. There was nobody there now, he said. They had packed up and gone.

It had been her choice, after all. "It's a woman's privilege," he said. "Like they say, it's a woman's privilege to change her mind."

His eyes, now that I looked into them, had a dry famished look, and the skin around them was dark and wrinkled. He pursed his mouth, controlling a tremor, then talked on, with an air of trying to see all sides, trying to understand.

"It wasn't the money. It was just that he was old and senile and she has a soft heart. And the fact that he looked after her when her parents were killed."

If I stared for a moment, he didn't notice.

"I wouldn't have objected to us taking him in. I told her I was used to old people. But I guess she didn't want to put that on me.

"It was a shock, all right, when I came home and she was gone. But you just have to roll with the punches. Better not to expect too much. You can't take everything personally."

When I went past the coats on my way to the ladies' room, I got the shirt out of my pocket. I stuffed it in with the used towels.

That day in the library I had been unable to go on with Sir Gawain. I had torn a page from my notebook and picked up my pen and walked out. On the landing outside the library doors there was a pay phone, and beside that hung a phone book. I looked through

the phone book and on the piece of paper I wrote two things. They were not phone numbers but addresses.

1648 Henfryn Street.

The other address, which I needed only to confirm, was 363 Carlisle Street.

I walked back through the tunnel to the Arts Building and entered the little shop across from the Common Room. I had enough change in my pocket to buy an envelope and a stamp. I tore off the part of the paper with the Carlisle Street address on it and put that scrap into the envelope. I sealed the envelope and on the front of it I wrote the name of Mr. Purvis and the address on Henfryn Street. All in block capitals. Then I licked and fixed the stamp. I think that in those days it would have been a four-cent stamp.

Just outside the shop was a mail chute. I slipped the envelope into it, there in the wide lower corridor of the Arts Building, with people passing me on their way to classes, on their way to have a smoke and maybe a game of bridge in the Common Room.

Most of them on a course, as I was, of getting to know the ways of their own wickedness.

I kept on learning things. I learned that Uricon, the Roman camp, is now Wroxeter, a town on the Severn River. ♦

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