

for she was too weak and too demoralized for the stairs and would wait for the sluggishly-moving elevator instead. At the opened door—through which several young women passed, into the foyer, glancing curiously at Drewe and at Conover—he called after her, he would not be leaving but waiting for her in his car.

From her room on the fourth floor, she saw his car at the curb, and his figure inside, dimly. When vehicles passed in the street their headlights lit upon him, a stoic and stubborn figure in the parked vehicle. He'd turned on the ignition to listen to the radio, probably. He would finish the six-pack of beer.

Cautiously like one composed of a brittle breakable substance—very thin glass, or plastic—she lay down on her bed. Her skin was burning, she was very tired. The cramping was not so bad, dulled by Vicodin. Her life would be a painkiller life: she would be aware of pain but would not feel it, exactly, as her own.

She was bleeding, thinly. She'd changed the sanitary napkin and replaced it with a fresh sparkling-white cotton-gauzy napkin for the WomanSpace nurse had thoughtfully provided her with a half-dozen napkins in a plastic bag.

There was no serious danger of bleeding to death yet the word *exsanguination* sounded in her head like a struck gong.

Forty minutes later, when she struggled to her feet, the Toyota was still at the curb.

He'd been trying to call her on her cell phone, she discovered. She'd turned the phone off at Eau Claire and had not turned it on again.

She slept again, fitfully. Sometime after midnight parched-mouthed and her eyes aching as if she had not slept at all she staggered to her feet and to the window. And the car was gone.

From: *Oates, Joyce Carol. Lovely, Dark, Deep. Stories. New York: Ecco Harper Collins Publishers, 2015. Print.*

"STEPHANOS IS DEAD"

HAVE YOU HEARD?—STEPHANOS IS DEAD.*

"Oh no! When—?"

"Just this morning, I think."

"But—how?"

"A heart attack, or an aneurysm—something sudden."

"My God! Stephanos. . ."

Mickey was standing beneath an overhang just outside the quaintly titled Smila's Sense of Organic Foods, waiting out the worst of a sudden thunderstorm. Despite the loud thrumming of rain on the overhang and on the pavement it was impossible not to hear this emotional exchange between a Nordic-looking professor of math at the university and a middle-aged woman who was someone's wife. (Mickey knew: this was insufferably snobbish. In fact, in certain quarters, Mickey herself, despite her Ph.D. and post-doc status, was no more than "someone's wife.") And she knew Angelo Strephanos, or had known him, slightly. Mickey met the glances of the math professor and his companion with an expression of surprise and sympathy, for it seemed only tactful; she wasn't prepared for the looks of extreme sorrow, even horror, in their faces, nor for the way in which they seemed not to see her, as if she were invisible.

"But—where did it happen?"

"In his house, I think. Just—within minutes."

"He can't be very old—not fifty . . ."

"He'd been sick, someone was saying, after he'd returned from India . . ."

"That wasn't Stephanos, that was Bandeman, he came back with malaria, I think you're confusing them . . ."

"Stephanos was such a world traveler! He went to all sorts of dangerous places, like Kasbgar, and Tibet, and then, to die at home—"

"Poor Beata! She's so devoted to him . . ."

"My God! Are you sure? It's impossible to believe that—Stephanos is gone."

Now another woman joined the two, astounded and aggrieved—"Stephanos? Angelo? Died? What are you saying?"

Mickey recognized Abigail Burdine, wife of one of Mickey's husband's older colleagues in the political science department: a woman Mickey considered cold-blooded and aloof except at this moment she was looking stunned as if someone had struck her in the face.

Abigail Burdine was a woman whom Mickey knew, but not well; who hadn't been particularly friendly to Mickey in the early, difficult years at the university when Mickey's husband hadn't yet been granted tenure and exuded, in the eyes of tenured faculty and their smug spouses, something of the precariousness of a rock climber on a near-vertical slope: you felt sympathy for such vulnerability, but did not want to become involved with it.

Eventually, when Mickey's husband was promoted, and women like Mrs. Burdine were marginally friendlier to her, Mickey hadn't been able to respond with any sort of convincing warmth. She'd perfected a method of *not-seeing* which was a kind of reverse social radar.

Now crowding beneath the overhang, grocery bags gripped in both

arms, the Burdine woman repeated in breathless disbelief: "Stephanos is dead? You mean—Angelo Stephanos? Are you serious? How?"

"Heart attack, or maybe an aneurysm . . ."

"My God—when?"

A surprise to Mickey, and something of a rebuke, that the woman who'd snubbed her for years was capable of such emotion.

"The news is just going out. It's on the university Web site. You can check your cell phone . . ."

"My God! Oh."

By this time a half-dozen individuals were standing beneath the overhang as rain pelted the pavement. A sleety sort of rain striking the pavement like machine-gun fire.

It was a relief to Mickey, shoppers emerged from Smila's who had no awareness of or interest in news of Stephanos's death. They stood quite quietly by themselves staring out at the rain and biding their time until they could rush out to their vehicles.

Mickey saw with a smile how one straggly-haired young man, wearing a shiny yellow poncho, placed his purchases in his bicycle basket, covered with something waterproof, and pedaled out bravely into the storm.

Smila's Sense of Organic Foods was a small food and herbal supplement store at the edge of the university's older, central campus. Mickey had seen Angelo Stephanos shopping here, she was sure—she'd exchanged greetings with the man, numerous times—but could not have claimed to know him. He was a short springy gleaming-bald youngish man with a bluntly ugly yet attractive face, olive-dark, with sculptured-looking features like a European film actor of decades ago: burnished skin, dark goatee, flashing smile. Even as a younger faculty member he'd been something of a campus celebrity—often on the local arts TV channel—his photograph in local newspapers. Stephanos gave public lectures on such topics as "The Semiotics of Religious

Experience" and "Deconstructing Derrida"; his Introduction to Comparative Religions course had to be capped at three hundred students, not counting a score of community auditors who adored him.

Now as talk of Stephanos's death swirled about her Mickey felt a keen sense of loss; and embarrassment to know so little of the man, thus to care so much less than the others cared.

It was a curiosity, a part of the Stephanos mythos, that the man was usually called by just his surname—"Stephanos"; to students he was "Professor Stephanos." Mickey, if she'd called him anything, had probably called him "Angelo."

She tried to recall if she'd ever exchanged more than a few words with him. At a university gathering, a reception—not recently. And the short bald olive-skinned smiling man with the sculpted-looking face had made a gesture meant to be kindly, courtly—he'd seized both her hands to congratulate her on something, or to compliment her; and Mickey had reacted with surprise, and Stephanos had laughed: "Excuse me! I did not mean to *alarm*." (Which wasn't like Mickey in any case. She was hardly a fastidious or formal sort of person.) She seemed to recall that her husband Cameron had played tennis with Stephanos and mutual friends, years ago in the university courts off Broadmead Avenue where they'd lived for almost ten years. She had an impression of the wiry thick-chested man in tennis whites, with his short muscled legs, bounding about the court and making his opponents swing their rackets desperately, lunge, miss, send balls into the net.

Another time Abigail Burdine was demanding *when* this had happened, and *how*; as if there might yet be some mistake, or loophole, to rebut this news that so upset her.

Mickey was thinking, with a shudder—for the air was wet and cold and she hadn't dressed warmly enough that morning rushing off to the medical center)—how strange, the phenomenon of human attachment and grief; we can care genuinely only for those whom we know; even

when the deceased is obviously a much-loved, superior and good man.

You'd never heard anything but praise for Stephanos. Mickey thought so. Maybe a few demurrals—the man was so *vain*. (But what male professor, Mickey thought, was not *vain* in his heart of hearts? And what woman would not wish to be *vain*, if circumstances rendered such a wish not foolish?) His political allegiances—*Amnesty International*, *Doctors Without Borders*—his support of the Obama/Biden presidential campaign; his legendary generosity with students, and with younger colleagues; his robust good nature, good humor—he'd had a reputation perhaps as a European male who appreciated good-looking young women, and attracted them irresistibly)—Mickey felt the loss of all this, that she hadn't really known; dismay that she and Stephanos had not been social friends, that their social circles had not overlapped.

Why was that? Hadn't Cameron liked Angelo Stephanos, or, for whatever reason, hadn't Angelo Stephanos liked *him*? Or hadn't Stephanos liked *her*? In the University Heights community everyone knew everyone else; everyone's public-school children were tangled together like distant cousins; yet, lines of social connections were not always evident to the observer. Impossible not to think, as Mickey was now thinking, that she and her husband had been, in an essential sense, *excluded*.

What an arduous day! And now, this God-damned rain.

Mickey had driven to the food store after work to buy a few things she knew her husband wouldn't have purchased, though his office was closer to Smila's than her own; food-shopping had once been a mutual enterprise but had become, with the passage of time, a marital chore like others which she and Cameron pushed back and forth between them, never having clearly defined who was responsible for what, and how often. It was hard not to exude the air of a martyr, if one did just slightly more than the other, as it seemed Mickey frequently did. For Cameron's position at the university was *more important* than hers—his career *far more important* than hers.

"Would anyone like a ride? I could drive someone home . . ."

The downpour was lessening. Mickey dared to interrupt the talk of Stephanos's passing with her offer that was spontaneous, impulsive. She would have to know that most of her companions huddling beneath the overhang would have cars of their own but, as it turned out, both the Nordic-looking math professor and the woman with whom he'd been originally talking had walked to Smilá's, to make just a few purchases.

"Would you? That would be so kind . . ."

"Thanks so much!"

Mickey made a rush for her Toyota which was parked a short distance away, amid mud puddles; almost gaily she tossed groceries into the trunk, and hastily drove back to the store, as if fearing the math professor and his woman companion might have decided that they didn't need her.

It was good—this reckless physical exercise. For Mickey was not feeling so very robust. And so, Mickey felt the need to publicly disprove any possibility that she might not be feeling so very robust.

The woman sat beside her, breathless and distraught, her wetted grocery bags in her arms; the long-limbed professor climbed in the back of the car, urged by Mickey to "just push things aside"—the rear of her Toyota had an air of affable clutter, and it didn't matter if much of it was pushed onto the floor.

Mickey felt a childish thrill of excitement, driving these strangers in her car. It was not unlike the thrill you'd feel giving a lift home to popular students in high school—really popular students, or older students, in a clique superior to your own. She had appropriated their intensity, their grief—was that it? For she felt so sadly distant herself, from the late Stephanos.

But the woman beside her—(the name was Madelyn McCall)—was turned to speak to the man in the backseat—(his name was Andy Funkhauser, as Mickey should have known)—and their continued

talk of the deceased Stephanos was distracting to her as she drove in the rain. To her annoyance, they'd forgotten to tell her where to turn until it was too late—"Please, I know you're upset about your friend, but let's be practical." Her voice was sharper than she'd intended. She stared at Funkhauser's blunt sand-colored face in the rearview mirror. On his head was an idiotic METS cap, soaked with rain.

Now there was silence in the car. Mickey apologized—"Hey, sorry. Just, I'm a little anxious about driving in this rain."

"Oh, we appreciate it! Is it—Mickey? You're so kind."

"Yes! Thanks so much."

"You were close friends of Angelo Stephanos, I guess?"—Mickey spoke hesitantly.

"Yes. I think so. I mean—I'd like to think so."

"Yes. My wife and I—we've known him and Beata since we moved here from Iowa, eleven years ago. He made us feel so welcome."

"I wish I'd known Stephanos better. He was obviously a remarkable individual."

Mickey spoke uncertainly, not knowing if this was the right thing to say. Rain lashed against her windshield in a delirium. She was tasting something ugly and metallic in her mouth and the sensation made her want to spit.

It seemed to her that her words, foolishly inadequate as a paper grocery bag in a downpour, were met by her companions with a stiff sort of embarrassment.

At a red brick house on Mercer Street Mickey pulled into a driveway, to let Madelyn McCall out; at a Colonial a block away, she pulled into a driveway, to let Andy Funkhauser out. Both McCall and Funkhauser thanked her profusely for the ride but Mickey thought *Will they remember me? Fuck, no.*

SHE'D BEEN TO CHEMO that morning: 7:00 A.M. to 10:00 A.M.

She was one of the "lucky ones"—she understood. The gastroen-

terologist who'd discovered her colon cancer had told her *You won't think so right now but when you think back to this day, you will realize that it was the luckiest day of your life.*

Mickey wanted to think so. There were *good thoughts* and *not-so-good thoughts* in this matter of fighting cancer.

It was her secret, or so she hoped. No one but Cameron knew.

No one at the Institute knew. (Where Mickey was, after six years, still an adjunct instructor with no medical benefits. The enormous cancer costs—surgery, oncology, chemotherapy—were borne entirely by Cameron's university insurance.) She'd so arranged her schedule this term, her chemotherapy days didn't intrude upon her work-days; she had not yet missed a class, or even a staff meeting; she liked to think that her colleagues and students would be astonished to know she was undergoing chemotherapy, and why.

Of course, some mornings even when she hadn't had chemo recently she could barely force herself out of bed. She could barely drag through the day. All of her effort, and she had to think it was an effort in a good cause, lay in her imposture in public: behaving exactly as she'd always behaved, or a little more so.

Going to the medical center was trickier. If Mickey encountered people who knew her in the grim infusion room she'd concocted a plausible-sounding story about a deficiency in her gamma globulin count. No one but a practiced clinician could detect the difference between a gamma globulin infusion and the aggressive chemotherapy that involved fluorouracil and oxaliplatin.

These were chemicals enlisted to kill cancer cells. A strategy not unlike, Mickey had to think, spraying napalm in the jungle in the hope of killing the hidden enemy amid the fecund vegetation.

Keeping the colon cancer secret was essential to her. Even from her relatives and closest friends. It was a *Mickey* thing—not wanting sympathy, pity. Not wanting attention. The wrong kind of attention.

Cameron was willing to keep her secret. He, too, did not want to

be the object of sympathy or pity or even marked concern among his colleagues and friends.

It wasn't so bad—she'd lost weight. At last, size seven as she hadn't been since the age of fifteen. Her favorite foods made her gag, like old friends she hadn't seen in years turning up looking all wrong. She hadn't (yet) lost much of her thick dark-blond hair. She hadn't (yet) had the most extreme side effects of the treatment—fainting, seizures, extreme vomiting and diarrhea, death.

Sometime in the first night following an infusion her cheeks became flushed as the cheeks of a girl skater in a Norman Rockwell painting and by morning, her right eye was bloody.

She'd learned to think *This is lucky! Only one eye.*

Cameron hadn't noticed the bloody right eye. Cameron might have noticed the weight loss but said nothing. But then, Cameron hadn't looked at Mickey very often, in recent months. Nor did Cameron touch her very often, in recent months. An impulse came over her at times to wave her hand in front of his eyes to attract his attention—*Hi! This is me, Mickey!*—but, then what? Did she really want Cameron's attention, up close?

Cameron had reacted to her brassy-chemical breath. She'd only realized belatedly.

Leaning up to kiss him, just a friendly good-bye kiss as Cameron was about to rush off, and seeing how, just perceptibly, in a way that suggested stoic restraint on his part, Cameron stiffened.

For of course her breath must smell. The interior of her mouth tasted like battery acid that no amount of mouth-rinsing with alcohol-free mouthwash could dispel.

Sorry hon. I won't, any more.

After dropping off the aggrieved friends of Stephanos, Mickey hadn't been in the house for more than a few minutes when the phone rang. An agitated-sounding friend was calling from Berkeley—"I just got an e-mail that Angelo Stephanos is dead? Can that be right?"

"Yes—I think so. I haven't seen anything official, but . . ."

"My God! Stephanos! He was just here at Cal, he gave the keynote address at a LAPA conference, really a brilliant, warm man—he was impressed by a paper I gave, and he was going to invite me to your campus—and now . . ."

Mickey said, sympathetically, "People are very upset here, of course. I mean, people who know him. Knew him. Evidently he was a very charismatic person . . ."

"I wouldn't call it 'charismatic'—that sounds phony and shallow. Stephanos just radiated *life*. I'd been feeling kind of depressed about some things, and he really listened to me and said the most thoughtful, subtle things. I scarcely knew him but he said that when I came there to give a talk, he hoped I'd stay with him and his family."

This friend had stayed with Mickey and Cameron in the past, visiting their campus. The gratitude with which he spoke of Stephanos's invitation was slightly hurtful.

"He died at home? In his bathroom, in the shower? They're saying an aneurysm? My God."

"Or a heart attack . . ."

"Just like that! Terrifying."

"Well. It might have been merciful, so abrupt. He wouldn't have known what was happening."

Hesitantly Mickey offered her friend this banal consolation. But her friend seemed scarcely to be listening.

"Is Cam there?"

"No."

"He knew Stephanos, right?"

"Did he? Not well."

"I'll call later. We can commiserate."

"E-mail is best, with Cameron. You know how he is about phone messages."

Their friend—who was Cameron's friend from graduate school days at the University of Minnesota, not so much Mickey's friend—didn't hang up immediately but reviewed, in a voice of genuine loss, how exceptionally gracious—and helpful—Angelo Stephanos had been to him, when he'd sent him a rough first draft of his new book on the "politics" of transgendered texts; the book had just been published by Cal-Berkeley Press and one of the few but laudatory reviews cited points that Stephanos had supplied, which he'd intended to write Stephanos about, to thank him. But—he'd procrastinated. And now it was too late.

Of all that he'd missed by dying, Mickey thought, a thank-you e-mail from an ambitious younger colleague would probably not have been paramount to Stephanos.

But she had to console Cameron's friend, who was genuinely upset. She was feeling how bizarre the situation, in this matter of the evidently catastrophic death of Angelo Stephanos: she understood it was a personal loss, possibly a flaw of character, to be unable to share in the commiseration others felt so naturally.

"Angelo Stephanos certainly was beloved," Mickey said dryly. "When most of us die, we'll be lucky to be *missed*."

But this was mean-spirited, adolescent. This did not come out as Mickey meant it, as a statement of fact. Fortunately the friend in Berkeley hadn't heard.

"Stephanos was such an ageless person, somehow. He was so *alive*. Jesus! This is a shock. . . . I should call—is it Beatrice? Beata? She must be devastated . . ."

Beata Stephanos? Mickey tried to recall if she'd ever met this woman.

"Tell Cam I called, will you? And if there's a memorial service for Stephanos—of course, there will be—I'll try to get there."

"Yes. Of course. You can stay with us. Please."

Please. Was Mickey begging him, this man who was her husband's friend, whom she scarcely knew?

Of course, she'd spoken spontaneously. She was a generous person only because she was heedless and reckless; this was not a virtue, but you could see how it might be mistaken for a virtue.

Mickey hung up the phone and wandered into the kitchen like a dazed person—seeing, there, the wetted grocery bags on the counter. She had to put away the groceries—(of course, Cameron wasn't here to help her)—and she had to think about—whatever it was, she had to think about—something urgent and essential in her own life that was a million pixels swirling in a thunder-cloud about to burst.

HER PROBLEM, Mickey thought, began with Mickey.

It was a high school name. It had been the perfect, gratifying, coveted high school name. Mickey quite suited her long legs on the basketball court, her streaked blond ponytail swinging with its own antic life, her quick unfettered high-pitched and spontaneous laughter; Mickey was funny and sexy and good-looking (if not beautiful) with a smooth freckled face, creamy skin and wide-set sea-green eyes and a sly sweet smile—so you could forgive her for also being a good student, one of the half-dozen excellent students in her class, and one of the few who'd gone on to a university career, and then to graduate school. (B.A. in biology, Ph.D. combining in ecology/evolutionary biology.)

It was a Mickey thing to make jokes about the artificial-vein implant in her upper-right chest, that allowed blood to be taken, fluids to be dripped into it, without the excruciating usual routine of a nurse poking for a vein; and it was a Mickey thing to make jokes about the plastic chemo-bottle she sometimes had to carry, in secret, in a jazzy black fanny-pack around her waist, that fed more chemicals into the artificial vein to be carried, via her bloodstream, throughout her body.

And it was a Mickey thing to joke about the "Sexuality" section of the *Medical Center Patient Chemotherapy Handbook*:

Women Undergoing Chemotherapy May Experience the Following:

Lack of sexual desire

Vaginal dryness

Discomfort during intercourse

Inability to experience orgasm

Hot flashes

Interruption of menstrual cycle

Note: DO NOT CEASE BIRTH CONTROL.
BIRTH CONTROL IS STILL NECESSARY.

Mickey had to laugh. It was funny—*Discomfort during intercourse!*—this was tantamount to suggesting, to a quadriplegic, that he/she might experience some muscular discomfort while sprinting.

As for *birth control*—maybe that wasn't so funny. Just sad.

These clumsy jokes, Mickey did not make in the presence of others. Certainly not Cameron.

These were *inward*, brooding Mickey-jokes.

Now at almost thirty-seven she'd outgrown Mickey; but it was too late to try to convince others that she merited being called *Michelle*.

Worse, she'd grown into Mickey. She'd been shaped—misshapen—by Mickey. Like one of those stunted little Japanese bonsai trees except her stuntedness was mostly inward.

Mickey failed to evoke *gravitas*. Not a name likely to be attached to one who merits respect, attention, a fellowship from the National Academy of Science, or, in time, the tears of a grief-stricken community.

Cameron had fallen in love with Mickey—he'd never met *Michelle*. Now, not so much in love with Mickey—he'd have even less interest in *Michelle*.

As Mickey she'd been the one to absorb bad news like a deep-sea sponge bred for such a purpose. She'd been the one, in the marriage, to understand, forgive, and forget. (Amazing how volitional amnesia could be. Misdeeds of Cameron's had been whited-out as in a nova explosion.)

Waiting for Cameron to come home she called a few friends. The combination of that morning's chemo and the catastrophic death of Angelo Stephanos had left her shaken—she had *no feelings*, she was *totally numb*.

Of several friends only one woman, of Mickey's approximate age, spoke of Stephanos as if she'd suffered a personal loss. It was news to Mickey that Jacky Spites had been such an intimate of Stephanos but there was Jacky mourning the man in the most extravagant way, on the verge of crying—"What a tragedy! He was so *young*." Mickey asked Jacky to explain to her why Stephanos had been so remarkable; wanting to feel something of what the grieving woman felt. If only the acid-taste in her mouth didn't make all else seem irrelevant.

After chemo, Mickey was supposed to avoid alcohol—of course. And cold drinks, in fact anything cold. *Cold* seemed to attack tissue like something alive, leaping.

Still, a quarter-glass of white wine wouldn't hurt. She didn't think so. She had to open the refrigerator and remove the bottle with a woolen glove on her right hand, kept on top of the refrigerator for that practical purpose. And she sipped the cold tart liquid very, very slowly for fear that her mouth and throat muscles would spasm.

On the other end of the line Jacky was saying, like a migraine sufferer speaking through pain, "Stephanos was just, I don't know—a wonderful person, Mickey. So generous, and so funny. Beata is rather prim, she seems almost like his mother at times. He's so funny, mak-

ing jokes the poor woman couldn't begin to comprehend—of course, she's thoroughly Greek; he's only just half. Well, Stephanos gave off an air of something like *love*. It's difficult to explain . . . But you must have met him, too . . ."

As she listened to this lovesick elegy, emotions of adolescent yearning and loss welled up in Mickey. (Or was it a faint surge of nausea? She'd remembered to take her anti-nausea medication.) She recalled her first love—not a lover: a friend—in college. A poet who'd gone on to publish, with some success. And, not long afterward, her first lover—not a friend. (She'd lost track of him after his second marriage.) Seeing Cameron for the first time at the University of Minnesota where she'd been a new, young graduate student and Cameron had been completing his Ph.D., Mickey had felt a sense of intensity, urgency—she'd been twenty-five years old and had believed herself old. She'd been drawn to biology as natural history; but biology was now becoming computational, mathematical. In her environmental lab it had seemed that men were clearly preferred; sexism prevailed; that she was *Mickey Lewenstein* was a disadvantage, like a withered leg; that she tried to compensate for the withered leg by being brightly articulate, energetic and hardworking, seemed to annoy others in the lab including the principal investigator whose assessment of her stalwart effort had been probably reduced to a pithy utterance *Works too hard for too little*. Or *Smart but not smart enough*.

If she'd been a star in the U-Minn department she might not have married Cameron, or anyone; she might now have a professorial position, with tenure, at a good university; yet by now, to be reasonable, she might also be burnt out. Molecular biology was the cutting-edge science of the new century, like neuroscience. And the colon cancer would have caught up with her, being, she guessed, genetically-predetermined to strike her approximately when it had.

Strange, she rarely thought of it. Of this mysterious voracious it residing in her very guts.

That she wasn't afraid of the cancer, much—this was more surprising to her. She trusted her (excellent, Asian-American, woman) oncologist and believed that the chemo would prevent the spread of the cancer elsewhere; the tiny tumor had been surgically removed, very deftly done, and had left a small precise puckered-looking incision almost immediately above her belly button, like a tattoo.

If he'd loved her, Cameron would have kissed that sweet little puckered tattoo. Since he hadn't, so he didn't.

She tried to see it that clearly. Such clarity was a *Mickey*-thing.

SO RISKY. to love another person!

Like flaying your own, outermost skin. Exposed to the crude air and every kind of infection.

Some months ago she'd seen him. She was sure. Walking with a stranger.

By chance she'd seen. Returning from a late-afternoon run at the university arboretum and crossing the engineering quad which was contiguous with the consortium of buildings that housed the Grant Clark Institute of International Affairs where Cameron had an office and so seeing, though at first not knowing what it was she was seeing, her husband in the close company of—was it a young woman? A *girl*?

So long had Mickey been one of these herself, that legion of voracious *girls*, she'd failed to realize that *girl* isn't a noun but an adjective, applied to a condition. A phase of being and not a *being*.

No longer would you call Mickey a *girl* unless (for instance) you'd seen her at a little distance, walking/jogging in the hilly arboretum, in denim shorts, pullover, university jacket, leg warmers and well-worn running shoes; sometimes, still, her streaked-blond hair pulled back in a ponytail to whip behind her.

Closer, you'd see that Mickey had become, inescapably, a *woman*. Since the chemo, there were new, faint lines in her forehead and

the skin was both flushed and alarmingly papery. In the interior of her mouth, in the days following treatment, small canker sores that burnt like tiny peppers.

Sometimes after chemo she had a delayed physical reaction—shivering, shuddering, quaking and so cold, her teeth began to chatter. It was her temperature, as they said *spiking*—the intense cold actually a symptom of imminent fever.

So long as her temperature didn't inch beyond 100.1 degrees F., she was not in immediate danger.

Such quaking episodes were—oh, she wanted to think this!—like the aura preceding an epileptic fit. The mystic-transcendental aura of Dostoyevsky, for instance. An elite sort of pathology and not just—pathology.

At such times she was compelled to think that her mistake wasn't Mickey. Not just the name. She was thinking that her true mistake, if it had been a mistake, had been to blindly persevere in a field in which so very few women excelled that each had to be unique. And she hadn't been *unique*.

In certain fields of scientific research, as in politics, finance, and law, the female and the intellectual ran along parallel lines that did not converge, as the male and the intellectual did. You could be thoroughly an intellectual while not surrendering maleness; you could not be so totally intellectual and not surrender some degree of femaleness. It seemed to be a law of nature, or of culture so deeply ingrained in the species that it felt like nature. This was true of Mickey's academic women friends as it was true of her. Married, unmarried—it made no difference.

Her friend Jacky Spires had become a highly prolific, productive researcher in the volatile field of social psychology. Jacky attended conferences, she published papers, articles, books. It helped that she was unmarried—it helped that she had few distractions. She'd become a star in her department yet never felt confident, always harried,

pursued—"At least there's the compensation of a new book next year. I try to think of it that way. If there was only next year, and no new book, or new work . . ." Jacky made a gesture of eloquent dismay.

Mickey had lost the momentum of research, conference papers, publication. She'd lost the impetus to start a family. But she was still *alive*.

Except: she'd seen Cameron walking with one of them.

Might've been a first-year graduate student. So young!

On a side street near the political science building. A couple walking together, talking intensely, Cameron's arm brushing against the girl's arm, and the girl glancing up at him, one of those smiles-inviting-a-kiss. And Mickey who'd been about to cross the street in their direction froze, and turned away, and fled like a kicked dog.

A sensation like a hook in the heart. And she'd thought *This is not new. This is not lethal. The marriage will survive.*

"Cameron? I saw."

"Saw?"

"I know about her."

"Her? Who?"

Patiently Mickey said, as if Cameron were a precocious young child, and this was a game they were playing, "I don't know her name—how would I know her name? But I know about her."

Cameron frowned. Cameron glanced down at his feet, frowning.

"Not sure what you mean, Mick."

"Don't 'Mick' me! I saw you with her, and it was evident—you are a couple."

"When was this? Today?"

Mickey's face was burning. This was so ridiculous—her husband interrogating *her*.

"Yes. Today. This afternoon. About four o'clock. On McCormack Street near—what's it?—Elm."

"Really? Today?"

"Yes! Today. It was an accident, I just happened to see you—and her. At first I didn't realize that it was you, and then—I saw."

Cameron shook his head, baffled. He was a tall solid-built man of forty-one whose alternative life, he liked to say, would have been skiing—Ski Patrol Olympics, snow-mountain rescue, working for the National Park Service in, for instance, Yellowstone. His wrists and ankles were twice the size of Mickey's wrists and ankles and she never saw him without feeling an involuntary sensation not unlike melting, or decomposition. *Ohhhh. Yes.*

She knew, he'd been unfaithful to her. Probably.

In twelve years of marriage, inescapably.

It was a *male thing*. For some, a *female thing* as well, but not for Mickey.

And now, she wanted to think she'd been mistaken. Certainly, she was mistaken. The look of hurt, surprise, indignation in her husband's face—she had to be mistaken.

"I can see you're upset, Mickey. It's the stress of these weeks"—(Cameron wouldn't say *chemo*, as he would not ever say *cancer*)—"and you're not sleeping, I can tell. But at four o'clock today I was at a political faculty meeting, that lasted until almost five-thirty. Would you like witnesses' statements, notarized?" Cameron's sarcasm was masked as humor so it wouldn't sting quite as much.

"All right, then."

"'All right, then'—what?"

Mickey laughed. Another little peppery canker sore had emerged, in the soft moist flesh of her cheek. But Cameron knew nothing of these sores, no reason for Cameron to know.

"Just—'all right.' I didn't see what I saw. I believe you."

LATER SHE'D WONDERED: the young person, the stranger, slender-bodied, so eagerly accommodating to the elder who was Mickey's husband—could it have been, not a *girl* but a *boy*?

IF HER EYES had seen *boy* her brain would've registered *girl*.

SHE TRAVELED to the city by train to select a wig. In secret.

It was advised to select a wig before actual hair loss.

In the literature it was said *Hair loss can be more traumatic for cancer patients than the threat of cancer itself*.

She should have her hair buzz-cut, she was told. Oh but not just yet, she protested.

"Next time you come to see us."

In the unsparing mirror a shadow-eyed woman regarded her with a brave smile. Same brave smile she'd seen since the myriad public-lavatory mirrors of adolescence. *Well! Here we are.*

She was shown a beautiful human-hair wig, priced at three thousand six hundred dollars. This was *classy/glossy wavy hair just slightly lighter in color than her own and about the length of her own, now slightly ragged hair.*

She was shown a synthetic wig of approximately the same color, curlier, just perceptibly more festive. Eight hundred ninety dollars.

She was shown a synthetic wig, not so showy, but attractive, adequate. Six hundred fifty dollars.

"But I want a wig like my own hair. I don't want a wig that looks better than my own hair. I'm not trying to look *glamorous*. Can't you approximate that?"

Pink-smocked Mimi whose own hair was glamorous, blow-dried and gaily-streaked-blond, said, with a little frown, "Yes. We could. But it would mean taking one of these great wigs and thinning it so much, there would be almost nothing left to hide the netting."

Thinning it so much. Almost nothing left. For the first time Mickey had some sense of her condition.



IMPULSIVELY SHE DECIDED: SHE WOULD PAY A CALL TO THE widow.

She would *offer condolences*.

This morning a new spurt of energy. The old buoyancy, she'd almost forgotten.

In University Heights it was known, Stephanos's widow was having a kind of open house 5:00 P.M. to 7:00 P.M. and all were invited. A memorial service would be scheduled for later in the term.

In the late afternoon then she dressed in glamorous black: a taffeta dress with a stylish little jacket which she hadn't worn in (at least) a decade; high-heeled black shoes and black net stockings. So unlike Mickey's usual attire even when "dressy" she hoped people wouldn't think she was in costume.

Amazing how the black taffeta dress fit her. She'd lost at least fifteen pounds.

Sexy-chic. Mickey hadn't looked so glamorous since her high school senior prom.

Combing her hair cautiously with a wide-toothed comb as she'd been instructed. Still, hairs began to be "released." After the first two chemotherapy treatments her hair had not seemed affected but now, after the third, she saw a subtle yet unmistakable difference and her scalp was feeling singed.

In a near-panic noticing strands of hair backlit by sunlight from a window, drifting, falling. A sort of halo framing her face.

Wanting to protest *I'm still a young woman. My life is before me.*

Stephanos took her hand, and brushed his lips against the knuckles. *Of course your life is before you. But you must reach out and take it.*

She drove to Stephanos's house on Arden Avenue which was less than a half-mile from her own house. She was feeling such sorrow for the widow whom she scarcely knew.

For Stephanos, she felt only a kind of numbness. A vague sense

of loss but also resentment at this loss. For the man hadn't been her friend—not hers and Cameron's.

But for the widow she felt something like pain. A pain that left her breathless. A shared—(but how could it be shared? Beata Stephanos knew nothing of her)—terror at the abrupt loss of the husband which must feel like an amputation. She thought *I hope she will let me be her friend. I hope I can help her.*

This was naive, probably. Ridiculous. The Stephanos family had relatives, countless close friends. A phalanx of people who'd loved Stephanos and would protect the widow.

So many vehicles were parked in front of Stephanos's house, and on side streets near the house, Mickey had to walk a considerable distance in the sexy high-heeled shoes and in her arms bearing a lavish bouquet of flowers—calla lilies, roses, gardenias, mums. Impulsively she'd stopped at a florist in town and bought up the store saying a friend had just died and the high school girl behind the counter said *Ohhh. Is this the professor? Lots of people been in here all day.*

Stephanos had lived in a stately, just slightly shabby old English Tudor built in the early years of the twentieth century, like numerous others at this end of the older campus. At one time the residential neighborhood was considered the most prestigious in the area: the university president lived close by. Now, younger faculty preferred to live in the hilly, expansive suburbs.

Mickey drifted inside the house, in the company of several others who were carrying flowers, or casseroles, or baskets of fruit. Their greetings were murmured as if embarrassed.

So many people! Half of University Heights had to be crowded into the downstairs rooms of the Stephanos house. Mickey had to restrain herself from looking quickly about—as if Stephanos might appear. Almost, in a part of her brain, she expected to see him.

Mickey! So kind of you to come. My sweet girl.

She'd become chilled on the walk from the car. Shivering, mildly

quaking. The sexy black taffeta dress fitting her hips seductively and the stylish little jacket, button-less, fell open to show the tops of her creamy-pale breasts. (The puckers at the sides of the breasts, a result of Mickey's weight loss, and a curious brittle discoloration of the nipples, were hidden from view.)

She felt clumsy, bearing her armful of flowers like some sort of Greek peasant girl. She did see familiar faces, she exchanged smiles. The atmosphere was somber, heightened. Music was playing—sounding like Greek Orthodox chorale music. Everyone was excessively courteous. Except there were small children, darting about. On a long dining room table vases of flowers, floral displays, fruit-baskets, casserole dishes. Bottles of dark red wine. Stuffed olives, stuffed vine leaves, crusty white bread. A smell of something baking in the kitchen—quiche?

There were tear-streaked faces, there were muffled sobs. Mickey guessed that some of the mourners were relatives. A frightened-looking dull-eyed boy of about fifteen, a disabled child in a wheelchair who resembled Stephanos about the eyes. Mickey handed her armful of flowers to a high-school-aged girl who took them from her muttering *Thanks, madam!*

Mickey knew few people here. In her sexy black taffeta dress and high-heeled shoes she drew eyes. No one knows what to make of death. Never did and never will. Mickey wondered if she should feel ashamed for having intruded upon private grief but someone was greeting her, making her welcome—"Hello! I think you are—Elena?"

"Mickey. I mean—Michelle."

"Thank you for coming, Michelle. Beata is in the kitchen."

It was a vast cluttered kitchen. A harried-looking little woman was scolding a sulky adolescent girl. Somehow, Mickey had picked up a glass of the dark red wine. The first sip was delicious, like a rap to the pleasure center of the brain with a felt-tipped mallet.

"Oh! Sorry."

She'd collided with one of the Stephanos relatives. She was trying to approach Mrs. Stephanos, to offer condolences; she would speak quickly and quietly and retreat, for she needed to return home, and fall upon her bed. Too much was crowding into her head, she had to lie very still to process it. *A girl, or was it a boy. That close-companionable familiarity.*

Except: she'd imagined it. The man hadn't been Cameron but someone who'd resembled Cameron who'd been at a faculty meeting at that very minute.

She'd been reckless, heedless. After chemo, she should have set an entire day aside for rest. Her imposture of *healthy-Mickey* was becoming a strain. Cameron tried to take no notice as one would take no notice of a forced theatrical performance.

There was no denying it, a sickly-yellow chemical malaise filled her being. Not wine but water, not cold water but tepid water, was prescribed so that her tender throat muscles wouldn't spasm.

"Marta? Are you—"

"Michelle. We live over on Reardon Lane."

"What a sad, sad occasion this is! I can't believe it."

"I—I can't believe it, either. Stephanos was so . . ."

Could not bring herself to say *alive*.

Maybe she wouldn't survive after all. Her almost cheery equanimity in the face of surgery, recovery, chemotherapy was a paltry performance, and Cameron had caught on. His once-lustful love had turned to pity. Pity has no (sexual) potency. He was looking for a new, younger, healthy sex-companion. You could not blame the man: it was nature.

On the dining room walls and on a wall beside the staircase were family photos. Many were of the deceased man, smiling with his wife, children. Several were of the deceased man smiling in academic garb—honorary doctorate hoods gaily colored as Halloween costumes. In the living room, the Greek chorale music had ceased; someone was

playing the piano, a lovely slow etude of Chopin executed with musician's school precision.

There came Beata Stephanos into the dining room as if in search of someone. In such a gathering, in your very home, you would naturally seek out your husband. Beata was a short plump woman with black eyes fierce as a falcon's eyes. She wore black—layers of black. Her mouth was a thick smear of red in a doughy-pale face that had been an attractive face once, not long ago. The widow was in her mid-forties. Yet seemed, in her grief, ageless. Mickey was reminded of those excruciating drawings and woodcuts of the German artist Käthe Kollwitz.

Mickey saw that Beata Stephanos was blinking and staring at *her*. Advancing upon her with a look of fury. Not grief but hatred distorted the woman's bulldog-face.

"You! Dare to come here! So he liked you—eh? His weakness. Pretty girls. 'The blondes'—he called you. That's why you're here—is it?"

Mickey was too shaken to comprehend. It was difficult to hear even raised voices in the crowded dining room. Pretty girls? That's why she was here?

"You and the others—'blondes.' You didn't think you were the only one, did you?"

Mrs. Stephanos was furious, sneering. She appeared to be drunk. A dark-eyed adolescent girl with a look of utter mortification tried to restrain Mrs. Stephanos but she cast off the girl's arm with a muttered curse.

Then, abruptly, Beata Stephanos turned away, as if Mickey's expression of dismay had deterred her. Or so Mickey wished to believe. The widow pushed her way into an adjacent room, a small book-lined study off the dining room. Not knowing what she was doing but feeling that she must do something, if only murmur into the widow's ear. *Excuse me, I hope you will accept my condolences for your loss Mickey followed after her. She wanted to explain, and to apologize; since childhood, she was in terror of being misunderstood, and wrongly/ harshly*

judged. She wanted Stephanos's widow to look at her more closely to see that (1) Really, she was no one whom Stephanos or Mrs. Stephanos had known; (2) She wasn't young/sexy. But Beata was shoving something at her.

"Yes. Good. You are here. Good! Take it. I don't want it. No more! You left it in our bedroom—you, or someone like you. He would say—'It is nothing, it is just'— Beata made an airy contemptuous gesture, or tried to, snapping her fingers—"but now, you will—please—leave—me—alone." She was thrusting at Mickey what appeared to be a silk shawl—Japanese?—very beautiful, aquamarine, visibly soiled.

"A gift from *him*. I don't doubt. So take it with you—go."

Mickey opened her mouth to protest, to explain—but there were no words. And the widow had turned away, in disgust. Shouting at someone in the kitchen, who shouted back, in Greek.

Mickey departed. Mickey staggered from the house, clutching the silk shawl that was aquamarine silk embroidered with cream-colored threads, tiny gardenia-blossoms. The shawl, though soiled, was yet beautiful. She had never seen anything so beautiful close up, let alone held it in her hand. She could see that the shawl had been selected by an individual of impeccable taste.

Quickly she walked to her car, parked some distance away. Both her feet were aching in the absurd high-heeled shoes of another, innocent era. Her breath came short, with a little stab of pain in the region of the heart. *Stephanos!* A light rain had begun, again. The air was wet and cold. She drew the shawl about her shoulders. She began to shiver, to quake. She drew the shawl tighter.

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