

David Borofka

The Volcano Lover

GEORGE DAILEY AND TRUDY LIEBERMAN were in their early forties when they found each other again. Their first meeting took place at a dinner party held by the Hollenbecks a month after the eruption of Mount St. Helens. Bringing George and Trudy together had been the Hollenbecks's intent; dedicated matchmakers, they did not even try to disguise it. Abe Hollenbeck, George's employer, declared it time for him to quit mooning. George was going to get over Sondra sometime, and it might as well be sooner rather than later. So at dinner he and Trudy were seated across from one another, and topics of interest common to both were introduced with the spontaneity of an agenda. But, since smoke still paved the sky the color of cement and threads of ash rippled along the ground like fallen kite tails, all talk eventually centered on the mountain: what each person was doing that Sunday morning when it had blown up.

Abe and Bette Hollenbeck had been eating croissants and early strawberries on the back deck when they heard the first radio reports; they had looked but had seen no change, only a rare day of sun in May. Dick and Harriet Dereiko had been grocery shopping, and the produce manager informed them while he sprayed the lettuce. The irony, Harriet said, was that just a week before she had spoken with Harry Truman, the owner of Spirit Lake Lodge, about his plans to reopen when the volcano scare was over.

"It was so pretty there," Harriet sighed, "and now everything is gone. Gone. We lived in Los Angeles for so long being told that we were going to fall into the ocean that I never really thought anything would happen. Now the lake is full of mud, the lodge is buried in ash, and poor

Harry was probably blown to bits.”

“Who could’ve expected it,” Lindy Allen said, “when every night on television we’re given the latest update? It’s like the second coming. Everybody talks about it, but it never happens.”

“Listen, though,” Bette said, in her peremptory way as hostess, “listen to this, you guys. Trudy has the real story.”

“Go on, Trude,” Abe said. “This is not to be believed.”

Trudy seemed reluctant, but the other guests around the table insisted.

“I was camping,” she shrugged, “and our campsite was pretty close.”

“Pretty close,” Abe said. “She says pretty close, but what she means is that she was camping on the south slope of the mountain, and it’s only God’s luck that the eruption blew out the *north* face.”

She and her companion had hiked out when their car would not start. They had forded swollen creeks, they had clambered over giant trees leveled by the earthquake, and always at their back was the ominous cloud of dust and ash to the north. They had taken the pictures to prove it, enormous billows of gray boiling against the lid of the sky.

“As horrifying as the pictures make it, they really do not do that cloud justice,” Trudy said. “It could have been World War III. I wouldn’t have been surprised.”

“Wasn’t it illegal?” Harriet said. “I mean, to be there?”

“Well, I wanted to see it. We both did.”

“And can you imagine,” Bette said, taking over, “in the end she and Simon had to be rescued by a National Guard helicopter. Simon broke his ankle when his foot got caught in some rocks and tree limbs. Trudy had to carry him for a mile and a half over her shoulders before they saw the helicopter. Just like a movie, only the woman rescues the guy. I saw her that night on the news, being interviewed, and they had a caption underneath her name: ‘Trudy Lieberman—Cheats Death, Saves Boyfriend on Washington Volcano.’ So I yelled at Abe to come here, come quick, our little Trudy made the news!”

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It was an amazing experience, George thought, the sort of experience that was as foreign to him as snake charming or hang gliding the Pyramids. George tried to picture this small, compactly built woman desperately signalling to a helicopter hovering overhead while apocalypse threatened; the image, however, refused to form. During dinner George had admired the dust of freckles on Trudy's shoulders, the remnant of last summer's tan; he had watched as a vein in her neck faintly beat its pulse against the short necklace at her throat. She seemed level-headed enough, even for a woman who made her bed on the side of an active volcano. Abe had hinted that Trudy had recently broken off a long-term relationship herself—to the aforementioned Simon? George wondered—that she too was the victim of bitterness and regret. If that were true he could detect no signs of lingering trauma. Her eyes were green, flecked with gold, and clearly engaged in the present moment. The bigger question was whether he could possibly hope to capture her attention, she who had so recently experienced the end of the world—what could he offer in the face of that?

The morning of the eruption, he had raced to Sondra's apartment, responding over the phone to something unspoken in her voice. She met him at the door in a housecoat, her face creased with sleeplessness. She wanted out. While a cloud the size of a nuclear explosion rose over the southwestern corner of Washington, he was getting dumped.

There was no spark, she had decided. He wasn't dangerous enough. He was nice, he was considerate, he was good enough in bed—that wasn't the problem, she assured him—but some women needed an element of risk or threat, a sense of desperate helplessness that he was not able to supply. He could plot his finances to the last penny, but now and then she wanted a drunken sailor in port. That might not be a very liberated sentiment, she said, but not every woman could counter a thousand years of conditioning. She still wanted somebody who might take a mind to grab her by the hair, tear her clothes to rags. Include her within the scope of his rage. She was so very sorry. Did he

think she was too weird?

He was too polite to say yes, of course. Absolutely. Too weird for his taste.

But he didn't say it because he couldn't.

After dinner, Bette Hollenbeck directed everyone in rearranging the den furniture so they could dance to Abe's collection of swing and jazz recordings. Since George and Trudy were the only singles, they were naturally thrown together at first, and although they expected to dance with others after the first couple of tunes, they soon realized that only the married couples were changing partners. No one broke in on them as if by contract.

Eventually, he led Trudy out onto the Hollenbecks' back balcony where Abe kept the party liquor and made brandy-and-sodas for both of them. Even with the sliding door closed and the drapes pulled, the noise from Abe's stereo was brassy and emphatic and echoed against the dark line of trees at the rear edge of the property. A light mist had begun to fall.

"Mmm," Trudy said, "it's hot in there."

"That's the spotlight. We're the center of attention. They're doing their best to set us up, even if they're as subtle as a cannon."

"Bette means well. She's probably my oldest and dearest friend. We shared cigarettes in the bathroom at St. Cecelia's. We wore each other's clothes."

"Abe signs my paycheck," George said, "so he's mine."

"Do you think," she said, cocking her ear toward the sliding door, "they're talking about us right now?"

"It's possible."

"We could give them something to talk about." She stepped behind a dark jumble of abandoned patio furniture and, after a few deft movements, returned with her bra and panties.

"Your turn, Georgie-Porgie," she said.

It seemed to be a dare that could not be refused. His essence, if not his manhood, would be threatened. He took

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his place at the far edge of the deck where she had been all quickness, and nearly fell over when he could not get his pants past his shoes.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” she laughed.

“I’ll try not to.”

While his pants hung around his ankles, it hardly seemed the time or place for such concern, and he wondered further to what use a pair of his cotton briefs might be put by this relative stranger.

“We leave ’em,” she said, answering his question. “Right here in the middle of their goddamn deck. We dance one more dance, then get the hell out. Just let me know if you feel the wind come up. I don’t need my bum dancing in the breeze.”

Her eyes were too-bright with the wine from dinner and the drinks after, and plotting seemed to give their keen shine extra voltage.

They opened the sliding glass door and ducked around the curtain just as “Moonlight Serenade” began to play. They danced, aware of the weight of scrutiny, then—as Glenn Miller left off and Bix Beiderbecke began—said their goodnights to the Hollenbecks.

“Night, kids,” Bette said.

“Be good,” Abe winked.

“Goodnight, goodnight,” George and Trudy said, an amiable pair of co-conspirators.

The front door closed behind them, and Trudy dashed to her car with George hurrying behind her.

“Can I drive you home?” he asked. “Or we could go for coffee.”

“I can manage, thanks. Maybe another time.”

“I’ll call you then,” he said.

Trudy huddled in her overcoat. Suspended in her short dark hair, drops of mist reflected diamonds from the street light overhead.

“Fine,” she said, opening her door, “I’d like that. I’m listed. I’m just not good company.”

“You’re terrific,” George said, “terrific company. And

we've already had our clothes off."

"There's that," she smiled. "Call, then."

But she was not, in fact, listed. And he took that to mean that her answer Yes was in fact the answer No, and that her trick with their underwear, rather than a shared experience, was merely a ruse designed for her quick exit. Once again, he did not have a clue as to the nature of women.

Three weeks after the Hollenbecks' party, Abe cornered him in Fitzgerald's, where George was entertaining Buddy Wentworth, one of Alpha Systems' best clients.

"Bette's mad at you," Abe announced. "Mad as hell." He sat down on the bench seat next to George, forcing him to slide over. He had been diagramming Alpha's latest network package, but Abe would not see that as a deterrent. They were his products, after all.

"Have a beer, Abe," Wentworth said. He was already pouring a glass from the pitcher. A millionaire at thirty, he could afford a taste of gossip and intrigue in his vendors.

"You haven't called Trudy. She thinks you're conceited as hell, not calling her after that stunt you pulled with the underwear. I thought you'd be at her place half an hour after you left ours."

"Who's Trudy?" Wentworth said. "What underwear?"

"That was her idea. Completely."

"I'll bet." Abe dropped a slip of paper with a number onto the table. "What's the matter with you? You don't like her looks? She's fabulous, she won't keep forever. God knows why that last one gave her the kiss off."

"Maybe she unlisted him."

"You call her. Tonight. This afternoon."

"Yes, boss."

Abe stood, drinking the last two-thirds of his glass in a long swallow. "Buddy, I'm sorry I interrupted, but my friend here is a moron. He's a helluva salesman, I can't live without the guy, but he's an ass and a moron. Stupid, stupid, stupid. A fabulous woman—this woman is a one-in-a-million opportunity, I swear it—and he can't even pick up the goddamn phone."

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“What underwear?” Buddy said. “What about the underwear?”

George did as he was told. He dialled the number that Abe had given him. The phone rang four times and then he heard the sound of an answering machine switching on and Trudy’s recorded voice, *At the tone, please leave your etc., etc., etc.* He put the edgiest voice on it that he could. He curled his lip like Bogart, squinted like an old sea dog, but it was still the voice of that nice George Dailey in his ears. *This is George Dailey, met you at, tried to call, Abe gave me, call me, blah, blah, blah.* He did what he could do, and now it was up to her. Which as it turned out was nothing. How could he be surprised when he had his own prior disappointments as precedent? He in whom the capacity for danger had been found wanting? Even so, every evening after work, he looked at his answering machine as a traitor.

Time passed. Things happened. George heard through the Hollenbeck grapevine that he had missed his chance after all. Trudy was married. To Simon. Her partner in near-death. They had taken the trip to the mountain as a last ditch attempt to revive a fading relationship, but something in the wake of their experience had caused first a break-up, then a reconciliation. Meeting George had been the briefest of interludes. She was pregnant within the year and, according to Bette, deliriously happy. A year later, George was likewise married. Sondra had come back, repentant and bruised, emotionally and physically. After a torrid romance and an equally stormy breakup with a ship-fitter from Swan Island, she no longer wished for a husband with dangerous tendencies. She promised devotion and fidelity. She admired his conscientiousness and balanced their checkbook with a zeal exceeding his own. Over the next five years, two more Dailey’s were added to the population, as well as a mortgage, three cars, two dogs, and half a dozen stray cats. George was satisfied that all was in place. Then came the unravelling. Abe Hollenbeck fled to the Caymans three weeks before a federal grand jury could

indict him on embezzlement and tax evasion charges. He took only a toiletry bag, his passport, and Alice Bevington, his secretary. Bette bore her sorrows with as much dignity as she could muster, but a few months later she was back in Ohio, living with her family—her aged parents and an incontinent beagle named Bill. Alpha Systems, it turned out, was a card house built in a wind tunnel. There was nothing left. Left to his own resources, George moved from one sales position to another as companies merged, folded, downsized, and restructured. With enough to drink at lunch and dinner, he found it difficult to remember whether he worked for Alpha Systems, Beta Products, GammaNet, or Delta Design. What did it matter anyway? Sondra went back to nursing, her profession before marriage and motherhood. She took pride in the crisp starch of her whites and the meticulous precision of her records. Who could have predicted that danger would once again sing its siren song? She left one spring night with a dermatologist who owned a red sports car and a five-bedroom *piéd a terre* in Reno.

In the wake of her departure, he consulted lawyers and therapists. His lawyer filed motions on behalf of his rights to custody. His therapist confronted him with the need to express his anger. He fired his lawyer when his custody petition was denied on a technicality; he fired his therapist when he broke his bathroom door into splinters. A second therapist suggested that he should find a hobby—woodworking or fly-tying, for instance. A book group, perhaps. He took up bowling, instead, finding solace in repetition—in the geometry and grace of shots that rolled true. Bungee jumping, it was not. But it was an alternative to drinking alone at night, and there was something fundamental, zen-like, in the variables of speed and weight, angle and rotation that appealed to a mind desperate for physical constants. He bowled only after midnight, uninterested in league or tournament play, the point of the exercise neither comradeship or prize money, but the ritual movement of his own body sending an object sixty feet away to do his bidding.

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He only threw a first ball, he never shot spares if pins were left, he never kept score.

“Now that’s a helluva nice line. You could be somebody, you know that?”

He looked up from the ball return on lane sixteen. A man in his sixties, the shape of Tweedledee and Tweedledum—tiny feet, a pear-shaped body, a small head with a thinning crest of dyed black hair. He wore a bowling shirt with *Morty* embroidered above the left pocket.

“I was just telling my niece over there, that here’s somebody who knows, not one of these young punks who thinks you gotta fire the ball like a goddamned cannon. It’s not enough to knock the pins down, you gotta break them besides.”

George shifted from foot to foot, waiting for the older man to finish. About once a month on average, someone would intrude on his session, no matter how late or early—someone old or drunk or both, a lonely heart in a dark time, taking advantage of someone without a defense. The only remedy he had found was to call it a night; there was no getting rid of them. The desperation that impelled someone to speak to a total stranger in a bowling alley at two in the morning also seemed to provide a superhuman persistence that no response—courtesy, anger, or indifference—could discourage.

“Morty Singer,” the older man said, extending his hand. “I don’t mean to interrupt, but my niece and I was wondering if you would like to join us in a little pot game. Nothing big, you understand. Five bucks maybe. Or less, whatever you prefer. She’s my sister’s kid, a little unlucky in love, otherwise she’s not here bowling with her old uncle. Unlucky? I don’t know, bad judgment maybe. Some women seem to have a knack for falling head over heels for morons. She loses her head, not that I think any the less of her. What I’m saying, I think it’s something genetic. My sister was the same way, and it just rips your heart out to

see them unhappy, because they're always going to be unhappy, sooner or later, given the schmucks they choose."

His ball was already in his bag, but then he thought, What the hell, why not? One game couldn't hurt. One game with Morty Singer and his hard-luck niece. With any luck he might win enough to cover his games. His niece was sitting at the scorer's table on lane thirty-two, and though she was a study of boredom, her head propped up on one hand while she shaded strikes and spares with the other, there was no mistaking the athletic shoulders, the forceful hands of Trudy Lieberman.

"You," she said, her green eyes tilting up into his own. "I know you. Don't I?"

"Briefly. We met at the Hollenbecks before Abe went on the lam."

"Oh," she said, looking down again, "George."

"You remember."

"Sure. We must have danced for two hours, and no one would cut in on us."

Morty hovered behind his niece's shoulder. "You two kids know each other? I shoulda known. It's the sorta thing you see on TV."

"Morton," Trudy said, "give it a rest already."

"What? I can't be happy? Mr. George here seems like a nice enough sort. Too nice for you, sweetcakes. I forgot you like them nasty, don't you?"

"Morton, I'm warning you."

"Awright, awright, let's bowl, okay?"

"Fine. Let's bowl." She picked up her ball from the return. "Straight score, no handicaps. Ten dollar ante. That okay, Georgie Porgie?"

"I thought you said five, Morty."

The older man shrugged. "Beats me, this girl."

"Five or ten," Trudy said, "it's your call, Mr. George."

"Ten. Ten's fine."

She stepped forward with the ball. Her delivery, beginning with a conservative four-step approach, was fluid and well-practiced. Her ball rolled smoothly down the lane,

hooking into the pocket at the last possible instant, all ten pins erupting around it. She posed at the line in her follow-through, admiring her handiwork, then, while touching the gold post in her right ear, turned and said, "Next," with a smirk directed exclusively at him.

They bowled for four hours, he lost a couple hundred dollars, all to Trudy, who had a knack for encouraging double or nothing bets and bowling just well enough to beat his best efforts. Sandbagged by a pro. The sun was cresting Mt. Hood when they pushed through the double doors.

"I'll buy you both breakfast," she said. "It's on me."

"No, honey, you're just spending our money to make us feel better. This old poop better head home." Morty enveloped his niece in a hug, then shook George's hand. "She's a pain in the ass, isn't she?"

They watched Morty guide his stomach behind the wheel of an ancient Honda. He did not so much get in as strap it on. George caught a glimpse of ripped seats, a drooping headliner, a sea of paper cups and sandwich wrappers rippling along the floor.

"You have to like him," Trudy said, "even if he drives a recycling project. Come on, let's get some chow. I know a place where the coffee's so hot you can't taste the lousy food."

He followed as she drove to a storefront cafe in Sellwood. Everyone seemed to know her, and coffee came immediately.

"So, what happened?" She held his left hand flat against the table and traced the white circle still visible from his wedding band. "You got married."

"And divorced." He told her the story, which in the past year had turned stale in his own ears. He no longer had the capacity—or the energy—to play the role of aggrieved husband. "So Sondra's in Reno along with the kids, and I'm here. It surprised me—it still surprises me—but I guess it happens all the time."

"Oh, sure. You can't hardly step outside without tripping over a millionaire dermatologist."

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes,” she said, “I know. Boy do I know.”

Simon had taken off five years ago. “He told me I was killing him. Little old me. I was expecting too much of him. Setting too high a standard. Poor Simon, he’s in Florida now, living among the oranges. I heard he’s married to some bar floozy with a leaky boat, and they’re running day trips for the tourists who don’t know any better. He’s like the poster child of irresponsibility. We didn’t have any kids, so I don’t have to feel guilty about that.”

“But—”

“I know. Bette told you I was pregnant. Bette told everybody I was pregnant. I was pregnant a lot. Miscarried five times that I know of. It seems I don’t have a body that can keep a kid inside without gushing. We tried doctors and faith healers. I even went to see this old woman named Miz Lydia, who claimed that I could have a baby if I swallowed olive pits and drank a solution of turpentine and spirit gum. Which, to my mind, wasn’t so much worse than the fertility specialist who said for forty thousand dollars we had a fifty-fifty chance. Simon liked Miz Lydia. He even offered to mix my drinks.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, listen. I’m sorry. I should have called you after Abe and Bette’s party, explain how things were with Simon and me. After we had our little scare on the mountain, Simon blamed me for everything. It may have been my idea to go up there, and I probably pressured him into driving around the barricades. But he acted like such a baby when things started to go badly that I thought if we made it out alive I better call it quits. I told him we were through while we were in the air. The guardsman in the helicopter tried to pretend he wasn’t listening, but after they unloaded Simon’s stretcher, he tried to ask me out. So I thought, Jesus, men are buttheads, aren’t they? You probably got lumped into the same category. A couple of days after the party, Simon called, and I started to feel sorry for him. He seemed so lost,

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and I thought it might be at least partly my fault, but I don't think he forgave me even after we were married."

She held his hand. "You would have forgiven me, wouldn't you?"

He felt the earth tilt on its axis as he answered: "Of course. Of course, I would have."

After several dinners and movies, after shopping together for the wedding presents of others, even after the steady humiliation of bowling with Trudy and her uncle, he marvelled at his good fortune: that she should be available for him. She was beautiful and smart, full of good humor and alert to the world's absurdities. When she laughed it was full and rich, concluding with an unabashed snort. Nothing like the laughter of the few unattached women to whom he'd been introduced recently, women whose amusement was martyred by the panic of fleeting time. He was not blind to her defects, but he did not wish to be accusatory, to be another butthead man. There was a streak of temper—entirely arbitrary as far as he could tell—that he found difficult to ignore but impossible to hold against her, for it seemed to emanate from the same wellspring from which her vivacity and spirit came. The first time they made love, for instance, followed one dinner in Chinatown when she had called him Buttlips and Fathead and Shit-for-brains and a host of obscenities; he had failed to grasp a particular nuance of Simon's failure of romantic character—after they were married he had refused to throw out pictures of a high school girlfriend.

The pictures were twenty years old, the girl was married and the mother of four children, so what was the harm? he had wondered. The harm, she said, was that he refused to throw them away. She had thrown her napkin in his face, her silver to her plate with a clang that had alerted their waiter. She had called him names that stung with greater impact than if she had cursed his family tree. She fled to the bathroom, and although he waited for an hour in the

red-flocked lounge and sent the hostess in to check on her, she would not come out. Finally, he sent the hostess in to the restroom with his car keys, paid their tab, and took the bus home, thinking that he would in all likelihood not see her again. His car would just have to take its chances.

But at midnight, after falling asleep on his couch, he was awakened by a pounding on his door, and there she was—sobbing, falling into his arms and cursing her irrational behavior. Demanding his love. She tore at his buttons, she yelled when she came, she pummelled his chest with her hard little fists and scratched his back with her nails until he bled. How could he not be touched by this display of contrition? In the morning, he might have thought it merely a dream, if not for Trudy's sleeping form beside him in his bed. Not to mention his aches and pains upon awakening. He checked himself delicately. He might have pulled a muscle, he thought, he might have ruptured an organ in the middle of that tempestuous night.

On another night they were supposed to see *La Bohème*, in celebration of its centennial, but Trudy was at home, sick in bed. The flu. Fever of 102°, alternately sweating and shivering. Her nose was red and her cheeks flushed. She had thrown up half a dozen times. Like a geyser, she said. She wouldn't want a dog to see her. Over the phone, her voice rattled and rasped.

She insisted that he go without her, tickets were expensive and impossible to get. Or he could scalp their seats, and it wouldn't be a total loss. He refused to go anywhere but her apartment; he put the tickets on her night stand along with the wads of used Kleenex and her pill bottles of expired antibiotics.

"That's right. Make me look at a pair of sixty dollar tickets. I'll be better in no time."

"I bought the CDs this afternoon. I thought we could listen to it. Domingo and Caballé."

"Christ, are you out of your mind? My head's splitting."

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She groaned and covered her eyes. "Don't look at me."

"You're beautiful."

"Hah. I feel like shit and I look worse. When I get sick, I turn into a witch woman. You're taking a huge risk here, bud. You should go away before I bite off your head and suck out your eyes."

"I'll take my chances."

Fifteen minutes later she rolled over. "God, are you still here? Don't you have any sense?"

"No. I don't."

"You're impossible. Listen, if you're going to stay here, go watch television or something. Call Morty and go bowling. Go to a movie. Do something. Let me get some rest."

He retreated to the living room, stretched out on her sofa, and fell asleep to Letterman. She woke him at four in the morning with the sound of her shower, the chugging of hot water through the pipes. Her night clothes lay in a wet, sweat-drenched heap in the middle of her bedroom floor.

"You okay?" he called.

She pulled open the shower curtain. "Jesus, how about a girl's privacy?" Her complexion was pasty, but her eyes were bright. "If you're still here, you might as well join me," she said, pulling him under the water by his tie.

Later, in bathrobes, they listened to the RCA recording of the opera, Trudy crying silently during the whole of the third act though she declared Mimi's death at the end of Act Four anti-climactic and unnecessary.

"Tell me the truth," she said, "am I Mimi or Musetta?"

"You're as sweet as Mimi," he said, aiming to strike a diplomatic middle, "and as fiery as Musetta."

"And you," she said, yawning, "are full of crap."

Later still, while the mid-morning sun streamed through Trudy's bedroom window, they cuddled in bed and played Revelation:

"My parents were in their forties when I was born," George said. "They had assumed they would never have children, so when I came along, they didn't know what to

do with me. They treated me like any of their other old friends, and I learned how to play bridge and *mah-jongg* and shuffleboard when I was seven. When it rained my mother made me wear plastic bags over my tennis shoes so my feet wouldn't get wet, and I would have to wait until she couldn't see me to take them off. I didn't want my friends to see them although sometimes I got caught by my friends who would laugh at me or by my mother who would be gravely disappointed."

"I buy napkins and napkin rings when I need to cheer myself up," Trudy said, "and I have drawerfuls and drawerfuls at home. When I overeat I drink vinegar as punishment which I think has more to do with the way that my mother teased me when I was eight, poked her finger in my tummy, and said, 'If you don't watch out you're going to be as fat as your Aunt Irene.' She hurt my feelings terribly because Aunt Irene—Morty's wife—ran a good two-seventy-five even after a full night's sleep without snacks."

The recollection made her shoulders quiver, and he touched them as though touching some ancient Ming porcelain. Her opera tears had mottled her face once again, and the fever, which had broken during the night, had filmed her green eyes in pink; he could have called attention to these details no more than he could have slashed her into pieces with a cleaver.

"Every year before Christmas my father would tell me that Santa couldn't come this time, that there were cutbacks, and he'd decided that the Daileys had more than their share anyway. He didn't mean any harm by it; it was just a joke like wrapping some tiny, insignificant present in a series of larger and larger boxes that each have to be unwrapped, and then the present itself is rather a let down. Every year on Christmas Day, after telling me that Santa wasn't coming, there would be piles of presents, my father would tell me that Santa had changed his mind after all, that we were extraordinarily lucky. But rather than feeling lucky, I simply felt guilty. I thought that I'd probably gotten gifts that should have gone to someone else."

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“Like what,” she said, “what could they have given you that you didn’t deserve?”

“Like you,” he said. “Like you.”

Because they were older and they had been alone for some time, they had assumed that they would never be with anyone again. As a result, their conversation possessed the quality of a confession spoken only to the mirror, intimacy that seldom occurs with another, and then only after the first bankruptcy or brush with infidelity. They spoke of first loves and first lovers. Peak experiences. Most embarrassing moments and most shameful secrets.

As it turned out, the trip to the mountain had been her idea all along. Simon had been extremely reluctant, and when the mountain erupted, their tent collapsed. The ground rocked beneath their sleeping bags. The wind howled. Simon’s eyes glazed over, brown agates. He shook his head in fear and disbelief. Because of her, they were going to die. She was responsible, she was the pig-headed one, he hoped she was happy.

When he broke his ankle, he was a good quarter-mile ahead of her in his sprint to safety, and she had half a mind to leave his sorry ass to the ash. And when she hoisted him over her shoulders in a fireman’s carry, he moaned—from pain or humiliation, she couldn’t be sure. Her knees buckled underneath his weight, but she tottered off as best she could, trying not to jostle him too much.

She heard the helicopter before she spotted the green tadpole shape. She set Simon on the ground and tore off her blue slicker, then her flannel which was red, and began waving the shirt over her head, hoping the color—if not her boobs—would attract the pilot’s attention. The pilot hovered fifty feet above them, the rotor sending up whirlpools of ash and grit, while another guardsman dropped a harness to them from a winch. She helped Simon flop through the yoke. He gripped the cable so hard his knuckles turned into walnuts. He did not look back at her once. As he ascended, rising toward the helicopter and safety, his body and feet

turned in the swirling air. Like someone hanging from a rope in a bedroom closet, she thought. Like a dead man.

“Goddamn you,” she yelled, though she doubted he could hear anything for the roar of the rotors. “Goddamn you to hell.”

She stood on this newly created moonscape, looking up while the dust and ash rose around her. If they flew away now, she thought, she would be the loneliest woman on the face of the earth.