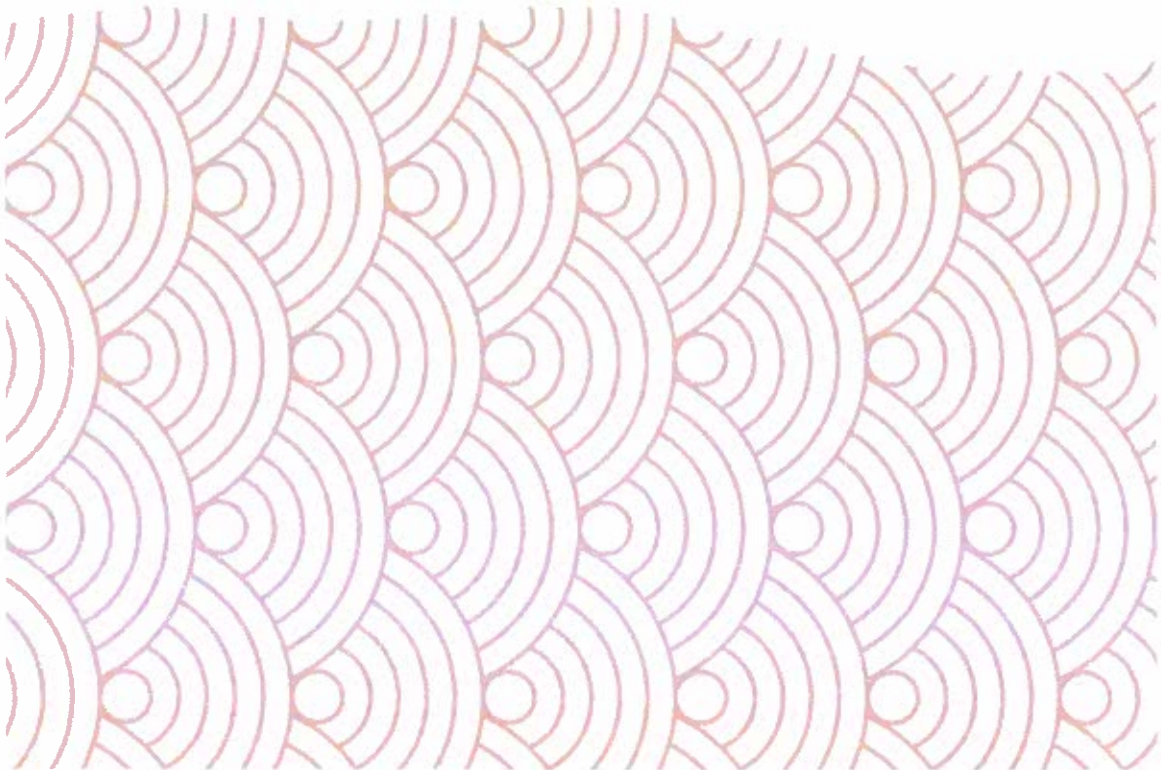




Class Reunion



Class Reunion

i

The faded-brown 1980 Ford Pinto wagon lurched from the underpass and out of the great circular shadow cast by Madison Square Garden. The mid-morning, late September sunlight swept the windshield and momentarily blinded Gloria. She couldn't see directly in front of the Pinto and nearly knocked down the man in the long coat.

He looked up, startled, but not angry. Then he smiled, nodded, and continued along his way. Nothing said. Nothing done. His reaction was extremely strange in a city where drivers and pedestrians could come to blows over much less an incident.

Gloria stared at the fellow. She quickly put aside her amazement at his acquiescence because something else about him surprised her even more. She knew the man. Or rather, had known him years earlier. More to the point, she had been hoping against hope to see him in her home the next day for a school class of '68 reunion.

"Bill. Bill Stokes. Is that you?" she hailed out the window. She ignored the car horn from behind and orchestrated a complex movement more at home on a ballet stage off Broadway than on the cement outside Penn Station. Gloria half-stepped out of the car, cast a quick *go around me* wave to the driver behind her, and spun sideways so as not to lose sight of the man she had almost run down minutes before.

"Hello? Gloria? Gloria Riding? Is that you who almost sent me home to my Maker?" Bill's voice was as friendly as she remembered. It was as disarming as had been his gracious nod to excuse her careless driving.

"Well. It really is you. That's great! When did you get in? I was hoping Gerry or Wendy would have reached you about tomorrow night's reunion. Let's get your things from your hotel and drive up to Connecticut together. The place isn't ready yet, but that's okay. What's a little mess between old friends?" Now out of the car entirely, Gloria swept across the sidewalk, talking all the time, and had Bill Stokes by the shoulders. She was ready to give him a hug, but didn't. He stiffened a bit and another car, too big to go round hers, was honking its driver's anger. Gloria flipped the car a wicked gesture with her right hand at the same time she grasped Bill's coat with her left and dragged him toward the car. "Come on. We'll talk in the car."

Pulling into the curbside a little further down 33rd, facing 8th Avenue, Gloria continued, non-stop. "I've got to wipe this fog off here," using her sleeve pulled over her wrist and held with her fingertips to take out the slack, Gloria wiped down the inside of the windshield in front of her. "My sister's cigarette smoke left this behind." She leaned across to get part of the window on the passenger side and made Stokes uncomfortable enough

that he pressed himself over against the side door. "Oh, sorry," she smiled and hiked herself back behind the wheel.

"You know, I didn't have any idea how to reach you. And that would mean you'd have been the only one of the group that wouldn't know about the reunion. God, can you imagine it? Twenty years since we graduated. Twenty years! That's two lifetimes these days. But I knew Wendy or Gerry might find you. You know Gerry wanders around so much and pops in and out of peoples' lives. I thought maybe he'd have run into you in the last few years or so. What's it been? About eight years since I saw you at that baby's christening? Or is it seven? I can hardly remember. Or Wendy. I figured you might have talked at the holidays or something. Being that you two used to be so close. You know I thought for sure you two'd be married someday. Well, how do you figure anything these days, anyway? So, where's your stuff? Her abrupt halt in a question that really was meant to be answered came as a surprise to Stokes.

"It's still back in the station. I put it in a locker and haven't had . . ."

"God. How rude of me. You just got in and here I am chewing your ear off when you were going to get something to eat before getting checked in and stuff. Well, lucky break. You won't have to spring for a hotel room down here overnight. You can come right up now. I'll get you a great sandwich. A new deli just opened. It's terrific. I can finally get good New York deli in Connecticut. I mean, really. Can you imagine how primitive it was? Just forty-five miles from Manhattan and you couldn't even get decent pastrami. Well, I'll pull around again. You go get your stuff. I promise I won't run you down this time when you come out. Just imagine when I say to everyone tomorrow, 'Guess who I ran into yesterday? I mean, really. God they'll just die.'"

In the relative quiet of the wall locker alcove, and in the shelter of his accustomed anonymity, Bill Stokes had a major decision to make. That voice came back from inside his head. *'You can rejoin the scurrying commuters, sightlessly nosing their way to newsstands and trains, avoiding the rumped squatters on the runways—the end of the line for them. You know this always reminds you of rats darting down a dark sewer drain, sniffing for food as they go.'* Or he could gather his belongings, staring out at him silently from the locker, its mouth agape. *'If you go to Connecticut with Gloria Riding, you know you'll never return to this City. You'll need to find a new place again.'* There just wasn't enough time to decide. Not enough time to sit down and think about the whole thing. So, he gave in.

He reached into locker J445, nudging aside its dented door and worn-out metal number plate, gathered his life, packed in a soft-sided duffel bag, and slung it over his shoulder. No one would have to know. He'd figure something out along the way. Whatever was going on wasn't until the next night anyway. There'd be time. Besides, if Gloria kept talking the way she had so far, he wouldn't have to give much of an account of himself until the others arrived. And by then, well, who was to know where he'd be anyway.

He kept his innermost thoughts to himself, and they proved to be correct. They were heading toward Connecticut in Gloria's car, and she was talking about fifteen miles an hour

faster than she was driving. "I had no idea when I brought my sister to New York, I'd run into anyone; let alone you. Bill Stokes. My God. *Bill Stokes.*

"She was up for about a week, my sister that is. She lives in Cleveland now. She was helping me put a few things together now that our divorce is final. Apparently my 'period of adjustment' just ran out, and 'I have to get on with living my life' according to everyone I talk to about it."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you were divorced."

"How would you know anyway? Nobody's heard from you for ages. Nobody knows what you've been up to. I'm dying to hear about it. I can't wait to have everyone together."

"By five o'clock tomorrow afternoon the first group should arrive. By ten thirty, if all the trains are on time, the late comers should be there. God, I hope I can get it all ready by then. But you'll be a big help. Together we'll get it done. I'm sure we will."

This was the most incredible situation Bill Stokes had found himself caught up within in quite some time. He was beginning to panic when he thought Gloria Riding was going to quiz him about his life. But it seemed, thankfully to him, that she was too wrapped up in her own life to do that. And she seemed to have his afternoon, evening, night, and the following day already laid out in her mind with chores to get ready for this group's class reunion he was supposed to have known about. She'd never get around to asking. And he could live with that. Quite nicely, in fact.

"It's up the road here about another mile. We'll stop and get some of that great deli I told you about and then head up to the house. What do you like on your hero? Ham? Roast beef? Pastrami? Any kinds of cheeses?"

"Ham with provolone is just great. A little oil and lots of lettuce, please. No tomato. And no mayo."

"Whoa. Have I found the great hero maven, or what? Sounds like you've ordered a bunch of heroes over the years. Have you?"

The voice was in his head again, *'So that's how it's going to happen. A little diversion here and a sudden question there. She's really something at dropping the real questions in along with her own monologue of rhetorical ones. She's like that D.A.'* He broke the tense silence, "You know it's really amazing how many different names there are for the same thing. Around New York City they call them 'heroes' like you did. But over in New Jersey they're know as 'subs' and in Philly they're 'hoagies.' But further up in New England they call them 'grinders.' I think that's truly amazing."

"Well, here we are. You coming in, or what?" But she had already turned the key to accessory to leave the radio playing as the motor cut off. So, he guessed that meant he was waiting. She got out, closed her door, and smiled back into the car; leaning in just

purposefully enough to distract him with her lowered scoop-necked shirt collar. “You know what’s *really and truly amazing*, Bill?” And before he could say anything, she finished. “You didn’t answer my question.” As Gloria turned to get their lunches, she left him, in the car, and wondering.

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There was nothing utterly grand about the house. As a matter of fact, the half-acre plot needed a mowing and a weeding quite badly. Bill thought absently about how many years it had been since he tinkered in a garden. He wasn’t counting the spring and summer he’d whacked the greenery along the interstate highways of New Jersey with college kids half his age. Somewhere in the bottom of his maroon travel bag he still had the orange reflective mesh vest. It had saved him from a vagrancy sweep once last year. It was true, he thought, that you could get away with almost anything in life if you were wearing the right clothes. Judges and cops had taught him that. Gloria’s voice broke into his reminiscence. Coincidentally, it was on the subject of mowing grass.

“Jesus, I hope I can get the kid to come this afternoon to cut the lawn. I’ve been inside so much I didn’t realize how last week’s rain really made it shoot up so fast. It’s been so dry that he hasn’t had to cut it each week and now, I’ll bet, his schedule’s all out of sync. Just my damn luck. I’ll get the groceries and the heroes. You grab your bag, and then we won’t have to come out right away again. You want coffee with your lunch or something cold?” Once more the cadence of her voice didn’t miss a beat. She had the car turned off, the two brown sacks in her arms, was out of the car and bumped the door with her stone-washed jeans hip to close it without pausing a single breath or skipping one word. Bill was still inside the car and getting his seat belt off, as she went up the walk, with her back fully turned to him. She wore her hair less “big” but longer than Ally Sheehy—having gotten over that *Breakfast Club* look.

Stokes surveyed the scene before him. There were no toys around on the lawn. None in the driveway. No bikes or wagons in the back yard. There was a tire swing exactly plumb and unoccupied. A metal jungle gym had long since lost its colorful stripes, apparently yellow and red. Paint chips bore muted witness. It looked too rusted to be used safely. Only one swing still hung firmly from the cross bar. Two spots were empty. The slide at the far end was twisted somewhat and bent severely at the foot.

The house was well-kept from quick outward appearances. The grey shingles were lightened by the sun, but not yet in need of a new paint job. The white paint was cracked and peeling off the fascia boards and under the soffits, as was usually the case before the walls needed redoing. The black shutters were fixed in place and were more dusty than ebony. All in all, it looked like a common Cape Cod style home in a residential community of Connecticut. Nothing special. Nothing at first that appeared out of order. Yet Bill Stokes picked up a real feeling of emptiness. A feeling that all the potential there was to offer was

not realized. Maybe he would think differently when the grass was cut and edged, and the beds weeded.

He was glad Gloria left the back door ajar. He felt awkward about just walking into her kitchen. But she had hurried down the driveway and disappeared around the corner of the house so quickly that he couldn't keep up. Maybe she had wanted him to see things without having to explain them. She seemed to have a deeper purpose for saying and doing things that was disguised by her more flamboyant motions and machine-gunned words. In her presence, he felt welcome but wary, intrigued yet trapped.

She answered his light rapping on the door by pulling it open all the way. It was quite the sight. Her coat was flung over the back of a wooden captain's chair and dangled from the table's edge to the floor. The groceries were on the yellow formica countertop, out of the bag, but not put away. The heroes were on plates, but the white butcher paper stained with oil was still heaped on the counter. The telephone receiver was perched on her left shoulder and her head scrunched down to keep it in place, while she poured two sodas into tall red plastic slender glasses more suitable for iced tea than cola. Gloria did another of her pseudo-ballet moves that was quite astonishing. She swung around from the counter and opened the freezer compartment at the top of the yellow refrigerator to get out some ice cubes. With her foot she closed the wooden door of the cabinet beneath the sink, from where she had fetched the warm bottle of soda. All the while she listened intently to whomever was on the other end of the phone, and ducked at just the perfectly precise moment so as not to snag the freezer door on the yellow phone cord that was stretched all the way from the wall next to the door clear across the room and to the countertop.

She smiled at Bill and moved her head to say *'come in'* without dropping the phone off her shoulder. It was a practiced maneuver if Bill had ever seen one. He stepped in and held his bag up a bit to ask wordlessly *'where should I put this?'* Gloria pointed with her free right hand to the doorway into the dining room and then began talking. "I know you have a lot of people to get to. But I'm asking whether you can do my lawn this afternoon or first thing tomorrow morning. And the beds need some attention too. Remember you were in a hurry the last time and said you would get to them this time around. I'm having company tomorrow and into the weekend. I haven't seen these people for years and I don't want the grass looking like it does now as they drive up."

In the middle of stating her case to the lawn boy, Gloria glided right across the room to the pantry closet next to the stove and withdrew a large bag of potato chips. It seemed effortlessly done. But she'd opened the door with her one hand, pushed the door shut with her foot without making it slam, and then reached up above the oven to get a bowl for the chips out of yet another one-hand-opened cabinet. As she arranged the chips into the yellow Pyrex bowl on the countertop, she resignedly stated in a matter-of-fact way, "Well, then I'll have to look for someone else. And if I get a good job, maybe I'll be switching in the future." And before there was any chance for the young man at the other end to answer, she simply hung up the phone. She didn't slam it down. She voiced no anger. It was said and done and that was it. Anger could have been challenged. But her tone was so firm that the discussion was over before it could move into the stages of becoming a negotiation.

"Now I've done it. I hate it when I rip off a blouse to spite a bra. But dammit, I do it all the time. Come on, Bill, let's eat, the soda should be cold enough by now. How about carrying these over while I get rid of some of this mess?"

He used two trips to take the plates and glasses and the yellow chip bowl to the table. Gloria scooped up all the wrappings and empty containers and jammed them into one of the brown sacks from the deli. She balled it up and stuffed it into the garbage pail under the counter in a spot next to the dishwasher. The other groceries were swept onto the pantry shelves, and she was sitting down at about the same time Bill was ready to take off his long coat and join her at the table. She ran her hands under the sink faucet to clean them off, shook them over the sink, dried the palms on the seat of her pants and then lastly wiped the backs of her hands down along the front of her thighs while walking to the table, grabbing the bottle with the rest of the soda for refills.

For the first time since they had met some hours ago, Gloria was actually having the chance to take a good, long look at Bill Stokes. The slight stubble on his face seemed to indicate he hadn't shaved that morning. At first, she had let herself think that was because he had just been on an overnight train ride. When she saw his coat was slightly tattered around the frayed edges of the hem and one sleeve cuff, in particular, her mind involuntarily proposed about three other reasons why he might not be clean shaven at the moment. His nondescript and loose-fitting sweatshirt added to her speculation. His well-worn jeans and sneakers did nothing to change the direction of her thoughts.

He was a man of slight weight, but he was not small of frame. He probably stood a full five feet, eleven; but he couldn't be over a hundred and thirty-five pounds. As he ate, she noticed he acted somewhat uneasy. He ate slowly and carefully enough; but he seemed to look at his food quite more intently than a person usually does. In fact, he was so occupied with the fixings of his hero hanging out the side, that he ate for almost a full three minutes without looking up to see Gloria almost staring at him. It seemed that he was almost unaccustomed to talking and eating at the same time. Since Gloria could do two things and talk at the same time, she was quick to notice Bill's singlemindedness toward his lunch. And he definitely seemed to redden some in the face when he caught himself looking straight into Gloria's widened eyes. They simultaneously sensed that a long silence had passed after they sat down to eat.

"I guess I was hungrier than I thought," he offered with an embarrassed half-smile. Except, it made him look like an innocent kid who got caught eyeing the pharmacy snacks display. His look was almost apologetic. He could think of nothing else to say but, "You're right. This is good, authentic New York deli." And immediately he almost regretted it.

"As good as they have in Philadelphia and Boston?" Gloria said with vixen cunning.

"Ah, you got me there, Gloria!" He tried to be humorous and then changed the subject. "Listen, I haven't cut a lawn or weeded a flower bed in ages. I'd love to get back in touch with some grass and dirt and weeds. What do you say you let me take care of the grounds for you while you do . . ." he looked around to figure out how to finish

diplomatically . . . “whatever you have to do inside to get ready for the big doings tomorrow?”

Gloria decided to let the whole thing drop for the moment. She was in a jam, and he knew it. Offending her potential gardener was no way for her to get her yard fixed either. Her teen lawn cutter of late had taught her that. She couldn't help but hear the word 'grounds' in his offer. It never occurred to her that her yard was big enough to be called 'grounds.'

“Sounds good to me. But only if you really want to.” Gloria's voice had an uncharacteristic finality to it. She ended without beginning something new. The lull was perceptible. It was the worst Bill Stokes had ever experienced one-on-one with another person in his entire adult life.

Now the time had come. All that stood between Gloria and Bill were their Connecticut and New York based deli sandwiches and drinks. Bill didn't know what to do. He didn't know what to say. He thought he'd try to pick up on the threads of the conversation that would direct attention away from himself. To deflect the inevitable for as long as possible. For forever, perhaps. Maybe even make it not inevitable.

“So, were you in New York to bring your sister to the bus, hey?”

“Yes, she came out to help me fix up this place, and truth be known, to fix me, for awhile. But she had to go back home. She has a full family of her own out there you know. Two nice young boys. Husband has a good job. Met him in school.”

“Why not fly?”

“The flights aren't direct enough. Besides, she has some of that . . . what would you call it . . . 'wanderlust.' She really does like busses. And trains. Plus, she told me, just this April smoking was banned on airliners flying under two hours.” Gloria began to laugh, both in remembering her sister and trying to break the tension that had so suddenly overtaken the room. “God, how she loves trains. Why, she can go on for hours about why she loves those trains.” But she caught herself looking at the ceiling and stretching her arms out as she laughed. She let her shirt slide up over the belt on her jeans. She glanced across to see if Bill was joining her in her laugh, with a smile or something. But all she saw was a faraway look in his eyes that chilled her to her very soul. She started up nervously again, talking fast to cover her uneasiness, chasing ideas around in a chaos to grab one that would make her feel less self-conscious again.

“Bill, would you top off my glass, please. And why not drain that liter yourself, while you're at it.” He did so hesitantly.

“I would have brought my sister down to New Haven. Lucky thing for you I didn't. But the train connections weren't quite right. And the bus depot is really in a tough neighborhood now. Just a couple of blocks from where I met you, down in New York, is

pretty rough territory, too, I hear, near the New York Bus Terminal. I guess bus terminals these days are all getting that way. Used to be, I guess, there were drifters coming in and out. But they wouldn't hang around as much. Now it seems the drifters aren't drifting any more. At least that's what it shows in *Time* magazine. Imagine whole families living on the streets. I can't see how people can do that. How people can let that happen to themselves. Can you see that? Can you understand it?"

"Well, it's very hard. I've seen some pretty tough cases." He could have kicked himself. He got lulled into carelessness by the strained silence. He suspected that he was in for it now.

Gloria shifted ever so slightly in her chair, leaning forward. "I guess you've been around a lot, knowing those sandwich names and all."

"Yea. I've been up and down the coast following jobs. Freelance, mostly."

"Doing what?"

She was at it again. He had tried to deflect the attention from himself, but he had slipped. She certainly wasn't going to let such a gift horse gallop away unriden. Now she would get right to the core of it. *'Guess it was inevitable, after all'* conceded that quiet inner voice, *'well now you best be very careful in the future, and as vague as possible for the time being.'* "Mostly freelance stuff. Construction. Consulting."

"It must be tough jumping around. You could probably write one of those guides for staying at the best places, huh?"

Damn, she's good at this, he thought. "Well, there's certainly something to be said for being able to live out of a suitcase. Knowing just what to pack. Nothing more than you need. Nothing less."

Blessedly for Stokes, the phone rang.

It was getting much too close for his comfort. To think to himself that he was saved by the bell, signaled how much of a sparring the conversation had been.

"Oh, my book's inside in the next room," Gloria said to the unheard voice on the other end of the phone conversation. "Near the other phone. I'll get it. Hold on." With a sudden swift gracefulness, Gloria glided again into one of her triple moves. She placed the phone down and turned to Stokes to say, "I'll be right back" and headed off into the adjacent room, all in one, fluid, uninterrupted motion. Gloria Riding was back on her game again. In top form. Her voice trailed back into the kitchen, "Have some more lunch if you want. Help yourself to anything in the fridge."

"No. This was fine. Thank you," he managed to say, almost automatically. But it was fine. Fine that she was gone for the moment. He could relax a bit. He began to wonder why

he got himself into this. Why he hadn't just headed down one of the stairways at Penn Station, gotten back on a platform and out of the city while this blast from the past sat waiting up on the sunny streets of the Big Apple. He knew from his past that there must be a reason he could not yet reason out. Perhaps with a little time. If time was to be had, that was.

Now that Gloria was in the other room, he worked to calm himself. To collect himself. To regain his surety and not let her quick questions, jumping out of the midst of her quicker talk, catch him so off guard. He convinced himself that after a little while he would be better used to it. He could adapt. He could be ready. He could begin to anticipate. But it was going to take some practice. He knew how. He just hadn't had to do it in quite some time. His inner voice confirmed it for him: *'Avoidance has been working out better than confrontation for quite some time now, you know. Just be careful, Bill.'*

Gloria came back in the room, but he heard her long before he saw her. "I'm going to have to go out to get things for tomorrow's party. Some chairs and things. Listen, downstairs . . ." She paused to look around the room, ". . . downstairs is a guest room . . . there's a full bath and everything. Why don't you freshen up and I'll be right back."

"Sure. Say, Gloria. Where's your lawn mower? I'll take a look at it and see what I can do."

"Yeah? Great! There probably is enough gas out there to get started. I'll take the can and get more for you while I'm out. Everything should be right in the garage . . ."

As she said the last words, the door clicked behind her. Bill Stokes was again alone.

Bill picked up the last of his sandwich. After those first awkward moments as she was watched his eating, Stokes had eaten so uncustomarily fast, unconsciously matching Gloria's pace as he did, that his lunch was almost gone. Gloria had taken what little she had left, to eat in the car. He moved over to the sink, stacked the yellow plates there, carefully wiping them clean with hot water and soap. He washed his glass with the same scalding water and soap. He turned the temperature down some, and then rinsed out the bottle and washed the outside, knowing the five cents it was worth to others, and how expensive it could be to him. He set them all on the drainboard.

He stood for a moment and looked around. It was now that he noticed that his coat and his bag were quite conspicuous, dropped right in the middle of the floor. He was happy for the chance to get himself rearranged while Gloria wasn't around. Even happier about the idea of a room on a separate floor from hers.

He picked up his belongings and headed for the staircase. Once in the guest room, he took his coat and hung it on an empty hanger in the vacant closet. He did the same with the clothes he was wearing. He had to keep them fresh. He'd have to wear these clothes tomorrow. Deep in the bottom of his bag, he came across his trusty mesh shirt and slipped it on over nothing else. He fetched a pair of faded running shorts that he usually slept in,

out of the corner of the bag. He slipped into his well-worn pair of unmatched running shoes, one a half size bigger than the other. He was now ready to work on the grass, even though it was not quite warm enough out to be dressed so lightly. But *'you make do with what you got'* his inner voice echoed his guiding mantra as he moved out toward the garage.

The inside of the garage held a collection of wall-hung and floor-strewn materials that pretty much told the tale of a family broken apart and moving on, a woman left behind. He learned why he had seen no bikes on the lawn. They were here—in pieces. It had been a long time since this garage had felt a car inside itself. A long time since this garage had seen anything together the way it was supposed to be. Skeletal rims for two kids' bikes stood against the wall without any tires. The inner tubes were folded over breathlessly, hoping for someone to give them new life. The lawn mower was buried behind the piled lawn furniture that needed to be re-webbed and freshened. There was a lot of work to do here before the next day. That or, at least, the garage would be locked and off limits for the reunion.

The lawn mower took a number of cranks to start. The dry, cracked hay from some wet summer mow still clung underneath its deck. The catcher bag, put away wet, more than once, had stiffened, become hard, and begun to crack. Each of its seams was worn along a fine, frayed line. This bag was going to catch most of what came out, but Bill knew it would be a mess when the job was done.

Except for its length, the grass was fairly well-kept. The lawn itself was an easy one to mow. Few rocks blocked the way. Obviously, the fellow who regularly did the lawn brought his own mowers and trimmers. There was no edger in the garage to explain otherwise how the azaleas and the rhododendron, the lilac and the hydrangea were all so free of grass at their bases. The little voice from within taunted him again, *'And, of course, Bill you're an expert at noticing things that don't let grass grow beneath them.'*

He was about halfway through the lawn, having worked up something of a sweat despite the cool of the day, when Gloria returned. The transformation that she saw in her lawn amazed her. But that amazement gave way quickly to her astonishment over the transfiguration that she noticed in Bill Stokes. He no longer had on the rough shoes and the long coat. He no longer was draped inside the mystery of some clean, yet somehow disturbing, clothing. He stood now as any weekend gardener would. His old sneakers, saved and matched out of two pairs. No socks. Running shorts that looked faded by sun and sweat and harsh fabric cleaners. But most incredibly, under the mesh shirt and glistening as hair matted and stood out on its tip was a firm and hard chest and a well-shaped, if not well-toned, body. The people who lived in her neighborhood kept that kind of body only by belonging to some health club or spa. But she knew instinctively that Bill Stokes did not. Because along with the toughness and the strength of his upper body, was that tough, hard stretched look hewn by hours a day, months a year, and year after year in the sun. Whatever he had been doing, her impromptu gardener had done a lot of it outdoors, and most of it without any shirt or sunscreens. He was an enigma. A mosaic of unconnected images in her view that played upon her curious mind. But beyond that, and far more

puzzling, was the physical nature of her response to seeing him. She had not yet started to date. And it had not been her insecurity or her infidelity that had ended her marriage. The wheels that Bill Stokes sent spinning in her mind, and elsewhere, were not directed by logic. They were driven by raw sensuality.

Bill was concentrating on the sagging side bag of the mower, as it dragged along the grass. He had neither seen nor heard the car off to his left, over the noise of the unserviced lawn mower. He turned to cut a new strip of lawn, and saw Gloria standing at her car, staring at him. He glanced up at her eyes. She turned away, embarrassedly, and began taking bags from the car. She wondered, strangely enough, what the night would be like and how she would make it through the night with a man back in her house for the first time in ages.

Stokes knew the look. The body language. And it worried him. He wondered how he would make it through the evening. This was more than he had gambled on. And now he was embarrassed, uncertain, unsure, and desirous of only one thing—to avoid her as long as he could, and then, to get away.

With the lawn cut and his shins stained a healthy green, he headed into the garage to put the mower away. It was stifling, but a little less than when he had originally opened the door to get the mower. With a little movement here and a little more there, he thought he could have the place fixed up within an hour. It seemed better for his peace of mind to be cleaning this garage than to be inside that house, where he'd be watched, probed, and studied. That voice again, the one that had saved him so often these last few years: *'the garage will take you through to mid-afternoon. But after that, who knows what will happen. Hopefully she will have enough to do to keep her busy inside the house.'* So, he went about arranging the rakes and shovels, the mowers, and shears. He found a rusted, but useable hammer. And a couple of small, unlabeled, kraft hardware-store-type brown bags treasuring various sized nails. He drove several of the large spikes into the upright studs and hung tools that he could, to get them off the floor. The remains of an excuse for a broom helped him clean a little out of the corners, where he neatly stacked the bike parts. *'Since there's no one around to use them, there's no sense putting them back together again.'* He hadn't wanted to get so dirty, but everything had a layer of dust or a glop of grease on it. Before he knew it, the green of his shins had partners in his oil-streaked forearms and his grimy face. The side of his nose bore witness to an itch that needed scratching before he could wipe his hands. After about an hour in the garage, he heard a door creak back on its hinges and turned to find two cool drinks holding up Gloria's outstretched arms.

"My, my, my. This place hasn't looked so good since—well never mind since when. I feel terrible. I'll have to cook you a good meal tonight to make up for this." She kept talking at the same breathless speed and handed Bill the clear, frosted glass. Before he could ask, she said quite simply, "Iced tea."

She glanced around at the corners and the walls and said, "Might even be able to put a car back in here someday. Of course, I'd have to clear some of this stuff out of here or give it to someone who could use it. No more use for this stuff here," she said in half a mumble. As

she picked out an old lawn chair that Bill hadn't yet hung on the wall, Gloria sat down and said, "Nope, won't be anybody using these things. Kids left. Both of them. Went with their dad. He had all the money. Had all the toys. He holds all the promise for their futures. I'm just a wisped memory. No sense getting bitter, though, according to my sister.

"See, Bill, they're girls. Going into junior high and high school. There's clothes. Boys. Picking colleges soon after. I can't compete with that on what an ophthalmologist pays his receptionist and appointment scheduler."

All of this was offered before Stokes could ask or show he didn't want to know. It wasn't that he wasn't interested. He just hesitated to be too responsive, because if this thing got to the point of reciprocating, he'd be right back in the very spot he'd hoped to avoid by cleaning the garage in the first place.

The drink tasted good. It was cool. It slaked his thirst. As he tipped his head back to take the last of it, a streak of perspiration ran down his throat, his neck, and on to his chest. As she saw it, Gloria was stirred again by those feelings she hadn't dealt with in a long time; a part of her she thought had died in the trauma of being divorced. She'd never mourned their loss. But she thought they'd passed. Yet now they were awakening with their own vengeance.

"My yard and garage haven't looked this good in a long time. While you were busy out here, I really made a dent in the house. Just about the only thing left is getting the food ready for tomorrow. But enough of that. You deserve one great meal tonight. And I'm going to cook it for you. Besides, I got a great bottle of wine to go along with it while I was out."

"Sounds very good. If you have a shower in that bathroom downstairs, I might use it before we eat."

"Fine, fine. That's good." Gloria was self-consciously stuck. Emotions were raging. She realized she betrayed her intent by saying she'd bought the wine before she had seen the cleaned garage and the mowed lawn. Suddenly seized by that awareness, she got up out of the chair. Her voice struggled with unaccustomed, almost desperate, lack of self-confidence and direction. She went with it, however falteringly. "I've a sweat suit that my . . . that got left behind . . . I know you didn't have all these . . . changes of clothes in mind when you packed. Perhaps you'd want . . . I mean . . . you'd be welcome to . . . if you'd want. It's in the linen closet next to the towels you can use down there. It's supposed to get cold tonight and . . . well . . . whatever you'd like."

Stokes eyed her nervously. *'Does she know? How did she come to know? Well, you'll just have to keep your eyes and ears open to find out later.'*

They both stood mutely, unable to move the conversation along to a safer place. Each covered the uncertain pause by finishing the iced tea.

As the safety of the last swallow was about to pass, Stokes thought of a way to get away from Gloria for the time he needed to think. "Say, is there another way down to the basement, so I don't have to track all this dirt and grass across the floors you just cleaned?"

"The bilco door. But it's locked. I'll go down and open it from the inside." As he set down his empty glass, she collected herself with only slight success and started out of the garage.

"Good. I'll go over and wait for you there." When Riding was out of earshot, Stokes wiped the glass with an oily rag, placed the glass in the half-filled rubbish can, loosely covered it with the rag, and then smithereened it with the old hammer. He walked across the grass to the back of the house.

While still lost in his thoughts, Bill heard the bolt sliding from inside the bilco. He saw the rustle of the cover swing up toward him.

Gloria looked straight up at him. Of course, he looked gigantic from the basement. But her eyes fell definitely across the muscles of his chest. And unless it was in Bill's imagination, she seemed to be reddening a bit. When Gloria noticed and realized she must be staring, she tried to turn away. But with the sun glaring behind him, she was forced to look directly at him again. Only this time she found her eyes were scanning across the front of his running shorts. At this, they both reddened.

Abruptly she blurted out, "God that sun's bright." She raised her hand swiftly, as if to shield her eyes from the light. Both Stokes and Gloria were each relieved that it kept them from looking at one another face to face. "Come on down. But watch your step at the top. It's slippery. And your eyes need to adjust. I meant to get that step fixed. But I never got . . . Well, one thing begins to go, seems everything else just falls in behind. That's not the only thing needs fixing around here." And before she could catch herself and keep her mouth shut, she was right at it again. "Maybe I could get you to stay around a few more days after the party. You were so handy with the garage . . ." Gloria froze in midsentence as she saw a look of utter fear arise on her soon-to-be overnight guest's face. It wasn't a look of polite excuse, or even embarrassment, or impatience on his troubled face. It was pure and outright fear—masked a bit by years of practice perhaps—but undoubtedly still there and unmistakably—fear. This excited her and cautioned her. She didn't know how to resolve her intense conflicting emotions, but she surged with the power to be back in control. Not just of herself, but of them both, and the situation. She resolved to make dinner the chance to push the matter further.

She tossed Bill the towels she had grabbed from the linen closet on her way to opening the bilco, turned and headed back upstairs, and smiling to herself, said gaily, "Have a nice shower. I'll get the dinner started."

Stokes stood. Alone. An armful of disheveled towels. Looking toward the empty stairwell Gloria had so coquettishly ascended seconds before. All her faltering of the last hour was gone, evaporated right in front of him in the heat of the moment. She had recovered. And left him dazed in doing so. All that was left for him to do was to take a hot

shower—hopefully uninterrupted—and try to recoup as well as she had done. Otherwise, he'd be no match for the threat he knew, in his bones, that dinner represented.

She heard the water running throughout his shower. At first, it seemed like he turned it off every once in a while, like a sailor using a minimum of water while aboard ship. At least that's what her husband said he was doing when she'd sneak in behind him, having shed her clothes on the bathroom floor. But that was long ago. Now there was a good long run of the shower, which she imagined was Stokes' way of either cooling down or relaxing, depending on if the water was hot or cold. She fantasized going down to check on the temperature, but instead took the dishes out and set the table. Then she went upstairs and changed into a blouse made of lighter fabric, left two buttons opened at the top and another not closed on the bottom.

She returned and began preparing the dinner. He appeared a few potatoes later at the top step. His hair was towel dried, unbrushed, uncombed. He saw he was not the only one with a wardrobe change. *'So, Bill. That's apparently how you spite a bra if you work for an eye doctor who needs patients to keep their noses in place to wear glasses.'*

Gloria thought he looked rather well. In fact, he looked very good to her. Again, she stared, sizing him up in the borrowed sweat suit.

The stare caught and surged Bill back to a sharp awareness of the present. Only a short time before in the shower, the taste of his sweat and bristling cold water reminded him of fighting the December surf by bulwarking the Jersey Shore sand dunes with discarded Christmas trees, dangling with tinsel instead of seaweed. Back in Gloria's presence again, Bill realized how, as the day progressed, she had less and less to say. As if the words from earlier in the morning were waves upon a shore, not with the purpose to communicate but just to pound away, to keep things in motion, to keep things away from her, to keep things from coming in, to keep her in control. *'Is she like this because her husband left, or was this what drove him away?'*

As she remained silent the pressure grew on Bill to say something. "Listen, I worked for a while in a short order place. I make a wicked salad if you haven't gotten that far yet."

"Well, I don't know if I have enough stuff for one, but sure."

"Then let's take a look. Show me what you've got."

"Okay, yeah," she stuttered uncharacteristically, his words had sent her thoughts reeling in another direction. And salad wasn't on her mind. "Go ahead, look in the fridge."

They both moved for the door at the same time, and they bumped. He looked up apologetically. He had squatted to remove the lettuce from the bottom shelf. She looked down at him with a tenderness that she had believed would never return to her again. He was so close and yet he seemed colder than the refrigerator. His eyes were warm, but that was it. For his part, Bill felt her softness bump him without intent. It had been a

long time since he had contact with another human being, other than a handshake, that wasn't violent or brutal or pushing or shoving. He sensed, perhaps over-sensed, a suggested intimacy in the nudge.

As he had been showering, he thought discussions were the things he would need to avoid that evening. But as she looked down at him, and he up at her, he began to wonder if that was all he would have to avoid. Again, that strange silence that unnerved him poured forth from this baffling woman. He needed to speak to fill the void.

"Let's see. We have lettuce, celery, tomato . . . What else have we in here? What about some of these left-over vegetables. These couple of florets of broccoli would be fine. May I poke around?"

"Sure. Please do. I'll go back and check the meat."

Bill was relieved. Even though he turned and looked into the refrigerator's deep recesses, he felt her eyes trying to penetrate his back. *'Avoid those noiseless eyes, they're speaking volumes.'*

A bit later, he presented his work. "Well, it won't win any awards at a four-star restaurant, but here's the salad."

"I'm amazed. That looks terrific. I never would have thought of mixing some of those things together. That's what happens when you start living alone . . ." she broke off. Her own mind nagged her in the silence—telling her it always keeps coming back to that. Stokes heard his own voice saying the same thing to him. They exchanged a look by the salad-bearing counter. Individually their minds shrugged, without even needing to reach their shoulders to communicate it.

She turned away and picked up the dangling ends . . . "It does." Then realizing she wasn't looking at him, kept speaking and turned back in his direction. "It just looks terrific." But as she turned, Gloria moved closer to Bill than she thought, and he was looking down at the yellow counter cleaning it off from the salad making. The saucepan in her hand hit his arm, and the gravy she was getting ready to put on the stove splashed onto the front of the sweatsuit he had borrowed. "Oh, my God. I can't believe I did that. Here. Let me get it. Let me get that." The wet cloth Gloria was using to pat the gravy from his chest moved unconsciously downward to catch the gravy. It was on his abdomen and chasing faster, lower, onto Bill's legs.

"Whoa. Whoa. I finish it up." Bill's voice was half a plea and half a coaxing to get through Gloria's upsetment, as he reached to take the cloth from her.

She brushed away his hand and said quickly, "Just give them to me. I'll throw them in the laundry." Then the thought struck her. "Why don't you give me anything else in your bag that needs washing. I'll take care of it all at one time."

Bill Stokes fought off, but to no avail, the same look of fear Gloria had seen on his face earlier at the bilco door. And he knew it. "I'll tell you what. The salad's done. Just point me in the right direction and I'll take care of it all while you finish up the dinner."

"Alright. I feel so . . . There's a robe downstairs where you got the sweatsuit."

"Good. I'll take care of it. Don't worry about it." And he left.

Going down the stairs it nettled at him. *So, what do you think, Bill? An accident? Or a premeditated gambit on her part?* He got the robe in the guest room. He had absolutely nothing clean in his bag anymore. So, he decided to wash it all. *'Just make sure she sees none of this or she'll figure out that bag's holding every stitch you own.'*

Once he heard the water start filling the machine tub, Stokes killed some time turning pages in an old *Better Homes and Gardens* he found tucked, standing limply, between Gloria's iron and her box of the new Tide with Bleach. He almost knocked a can of spray starch off the shelf when he pulled the magazine down. Leaning against the wall he almost yearned to be sitting on a plastic chair in a laundromat somewhere doing his clothes anonymously, as he had done hundreds of times over the last few years. *'Of course, you've never done that dressed in some other man's red bathrobe.'*

He couldn't remember the last time a woman he hardly knew had gotten him to sit through dinner with nothing on but a bathrobe. That was because there was no last time. *'And you can't possibly sit there with your long coat on now, can you?'*

Each of them separated by their tasks and places in the house struggled to imagine what the other was doing. They tried to guess what the other would think if each saw the other at that very moment. What would she think about a man whose carry bag contained three changes of underwear, four pullover tops, two pairs of worn jeans, a couple of overstretched socks, a mismatched pair of sneakers, and an orange mesh shirt with two pairs of faded gym shorts. What would he think of a woman who half-laughed and half-cried while she trembled and jabbed a two-pound bottom round with a serving fork to draw its own juices and used them to baste the roast on an open oven's rack.

After he'd come back up the stairs and into the kitchen, she handed him the bottle of wine. "I wouldn't dare try to open this. I'm liable to spill it. Would you do the honors, please?" He took the bottle reluctantly because her eyes said something more was coming. "At least the robe's red. If I spill the wine on that it won't show up as much."

She was looking straight at his chest. And then ever so lightly, she ran the back of her hand down the lapel. He looked her straight in the eye and asked, "Have you a corkscrew?"

She felt a tremor again, from her wrist to her elbow. As much as she tried to lead him on and enjoyed watching his discomfort, when he called her bluff, she was still unprepared. She just needed to push him a little further and she would win, she thought.

She let herself wonder what was under the robe. That was enough motivation. She would try again. And again. And again.

iii

They managed to stay out of one another's way, physically and verbally, through the last few meal preparations. As they were almost ready to sit for dinner, Bill heard a buzzing sound from downstairs. He paused, then figured it out. "Gloria, is that the signal that the washing machine's done?" She nodded. "I'll go put my things in the dryer while you finish setting out dinner. I'll be right back."

Returning from downstairs, Stokes knew he would again have to try to change the conversation. But it bedeviled him that every time he had before, Riding would redirect it. *'Just think back to all those union negotiations. You used to direct the chatter away from the manipulations of those union stewards and the bosses. Away from their innuendo of kickbacks, away from the shadowed threats of retaliation. If you could get through those for as long as you did, you can get through this.'*

"Tell me," he said in measured tones, as he pulled his chair into the table. "Tell me who's coming this weekend and what they've been up to. For sure, you've stayed more in touch than I have if you're hosting this reunion."

As if by tacit consent, their discussions through the entire dinner became something of a safety valve. There was talk of this one and that. Who had married whom. Who was divorced by whom. Some of the names Bill remembered and some he didn't. Some spouses not in their class he'd never met. The images he retained of some classmates were yearbook portraits and not visions of them as adults. Gloria had a remarkable way of filling in the gaps. It was a wonderful dinner. For the first time that day they were enjoying a conversation and not sparring.

"Gloria, have you met all of our classmates' spouses who weren't in school with us?"

"No. And there's one fellow I'm really dying to meet. He's supposed to be a bigwig in the labor movement."

"Oh. Who's that?"

"Don't really know his name. Nor how they met. But he met Melissa Rodriguez. Do you remember her?"

Bill mused a bit. "Rodriguez. Rodriguez. That was her name or that's her married name?"

"First husband's name. She kept it for professional reasons. Her maiden name's Caminez."

"She was on the debating team. Wasn't she.?"

Gloria noticed a completely different tone in Bill's question. The conversation over the dinner had obviously relaxed him. Put him at ease. Taken away some of the tension she created between the two of them. She seemed to feel he somehow made her ease back on trying so hard to solve her intrigue with him. And Bill's question about the Rodriguez woman came with a calculated confidence she couldn't figure out. She could only notice that it was different.

"Yes. She was on the debating team." Gloria affirmed and then followed the path to see where Bill was going, or at least from where he was coming. "And she put those skills to good use. She's pulling down big Ks each year as an Assistant District Attorney." Would he bite?

"Is that right? Which D.A.?"

"Right here. I mean, in Manhattan. She's divorced. I used to talk to her by phone about three times a year a few years back. Then we lost touch a bit, maybe because of her divorce, I guess. But she wrote to accept for tomorrow. Said she'd call nearer the weekend to say just when they would get here. She said she was seeing a guy she met from a case some other assistant D.A. was working on. Something to do with labor unions. She said I'd really be interested in hearing about the case. She didn't give me a clue about why. Just said it would make for great talk at our class reunion."

"What kind of work does she do on her own cases?" Bill asked with purpose, but without increased intensity.

"Oh, she gets heavily into organized crime. Back a few years ago she was doing a tremendous amount of research into organized crime. For a while she was unsure how safe the work would be. I used to think of her every time some mobster was on trial in New York. But I guess she felt she evidently had enough protection because she's still doing it."

"But the union guy? Isn't that some kind of conflict of interest, or something?" Bill wasn't pressing but he was skillfully keeping the talk on the course he wanted.

"Oh, no. She said it was somebody else's case. Besides, that was labor. She's into crime lords. It's different, I guess . . ."

He spoke right over her words, "What's his name?"

". . . they met at some post-trial party or something. And they seemed to hit it off. I never caught his name."

She paused, sipped her last bit of wine, and reached for the bottle. Bill saw, picked it up, and topped off both their glasses, perfectly content to continue the conversation. Gloria asked, "Why are you so interested in this anyway?"

"I'm just building a mental file for the weekend. You know, you start passing out drinks to people and talking to them and having food with them, it's not good to forget their names. There was the shortest pause, and what looked to Gloria like a sly little smile forming as Bill spoke. "Besides, just wouldn't do, not to know who we're talking to, now, would it?" and then put his glass to his lips and sipped.

She saw an opening. "Oh, yeah. Are you good at names? I mean other than for sandwiches!"

"What? Oh, that." He laughed. "Yes, I guess I'm pretty good with names."

Before it was a threat she thought, and now he was able to laugh off her inquiries about the sandwiches. She lost her train of thought, compelled more about his asking about the weekend's guests. "Well, let's see how good you are. Tell me back the names of all the people I've told you about during dinner."

"Why? You don't believe me?" Bill was a little short.

Gloria felt he had moved on to a new element. Her challenge wasn't disconcerting to him as it had been earlier in the day. Maybe it was because she wasn't asking about his personal life. Still, she no longer felt she was drawing him in as easily. Maybe it would be harder than she thought when this dinner discussion was over, and they moved on to the rest of the evening. She changed her tack. "Bill you might as well get used to it. We'll probably wind up playing some silly party games at one point over the weekend."

"Okay, then. Here you go . . ." He started off and as his voice went on and she partially listened and partially wondered, he did remember every single person she had told him about. People not only whom he did not recall from their school days, but he remembered their spouses' names as well. Not only that captured her. There was more.

Ever since she almost ran Bill over in Manhattan earlier that morning, Gloria felt that Bill Stokes was a distracted and far less intense person than she would have imagined him to be as an adult, based on their time in school. But this discussion of people from their past and this little memory demonstration she had insisted upon, brought to the surface a different person than the one who seemed to bungle his way through the day. As Bill finished up with the names, she was so totally absorbed that she put aside the contest to get him unsettled. She cooled down her desire for him. She abandoned waging the sexual conquest she had plotted since she left him behind in the car at the deli. She felt akin to vanquished. All she could do was move on to the ice cream and an apple pie she had bought at the store.

She stood up and asked, "Hey, Bill. You want some coffee with dessert?"

"Depends. What's dessert?" was his matter-of-fact response.

"How about good old American apple pie with vanilla ice cream à la mode and a cup of coffee?"

"What could be better? You're on." He started to stand up to help clear the table. But she stopped him.

"Stay there. I'll do it. Tell me a little about how you remembered all those names. I only told you them once. Is there a trick to it? What do you do?" Her voice was genuine. No guile. No trap.

As she reached for the plate, Bill made sure to help and to rinse his glass and put it into the dishwasher right away. Then he sat back down. He was pleased with the sea change he'd engineered. Only several hours ago in this very same room, Gloria was talking on the phone, having a conversation with him, serving their lunch, and starting to eat—all in one fluid, integrated motion. Now after dinner, Gloria had stood up. Then she spoke about dessert. And then she started to clear the table. Each one of the three things was a distinctly separate and almost thought-about action. And her question was one of true wonder about his memory skills. It wasn't the afternoon's prying, probing, insidious interrogation.

'Yes, Bill. The tide is turning. But don't force it. She may not notice. And you can ride that tide.'

"Well memory's always been a valuable thing to me. You know I worked my way through school. Many of the people coming here this weekend used to give me a hard time for that. Called me anti-social. Remember?" She shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. He went on. "Maybe you didn't know that. Maybe I just thought you did. Most of the grades I got I earned because I could remember what the teachers talked about in class. I didn't have enough time to read all the assignments. Now don't get me wrong. I read quite a bit; but I didn't have time to read it all, or to review my class notes. But more often than not, our teachers taught by lecturing about and discussing those things that were important or of most interest to them. And inevitably, that's what found its way on to the major exams, too.

"Same thing carries through to business. People tell you what's most important to them. You just have to listen and remember who said what about whom. I've been involved in . . . *'go ahead, you don't need to feel threatened any longer to go on with this part'*. . . shall we say, a variety of different businesses for myself and other people. Like I told you, I've worked freelance. You have to be able to remember people and remember how to do jobs the way they want them to be done. You have to remember where the work is seasonally. You have to remember how to move up or down the coast to anticipate the next job as the current season ends. You have to remember whom to contact. Their names and phone numbers. When to call. What schedules they work. It's just a life skill. And the better you

are at it, the better you do in life. At least for those things you can control. There's no trick. No game. Just a learned life skill."

iv

The last islands of pie crust floated in the remaining pond of white, melted cream on Bill's plate. He moved the tides with his fork and sipped his coffee. They talked about the teachers they had. True, the teachers were not invited to the weekend. But Bill's comments about memory and passing tests and getting grades from this teacher or that professor's class presentations, made the transition an easy one to discuss over dessert.

Gloria didn't mind. It gave her a safe ground and time on which to figure out how to react to what was happening. Bill Stokes was thrilled. Every pace in their discussion was another step to the high ground. The phone rang. Gloria was slow in responding. It was already the fourth ring when she picked it up from her chair. She stayed with the phone at the table across from Bill. He could hear a woman's voice, but not the words she was saying.

"Gloria. How are you doing?"

"Fine. Who's this?"

"It's Melissa Rodriguez."

"No way! We were just talking about you."

"We? Who's we? Some people are there already for the weekend?"

"Yeah. Bill's here. And how are you? I'm dying to meet your hunk. You are bringing him, aren't you?"

"What? Of course. You said 'Bill.' Bill who?"

"Bill Stokes."

"Is that right? Wow." There was a pause. And a slight click. Gloria made nothing of it, thinking Melissa's call waiting had clicked in.

"Is that another call you have to take?" Gloria asked. And as she did, she pointed to the receiver and silently mouthed Melissa Rodriguez's name in an exaggerated fashion to Bill. She saw one of his eyebrows rise as he playfully sported an almost comic look of surprise of his own, covering his true emotion in mimicking Gloria's.

"No. I hate those things interrupting my calls. I don't even have one on the phone. Listen, we were going to drive tomorrow and see the countryside. But now think we might get delayed if we wait because the car's in the shop. And I'm afraid if I go into the office, they may give me a case to look at or something to mess up our getting away. We can get a train that leaves Grand Central this evening. If you could pick us up at the station tonight, we'll worry about bumming a ride back from someone at the end of the weekend. I know you're probably busy getting last minute stuff done and I wasn't going to ask. But since Bill's there, maybe you could send him to Bridgeport to pick us up. What do you say. We'll get a jump on the weekend?"

Gloria looked over at Bill as he moved the pie bits around on his plate, casually listening to Gloria's end of the conversation. She made a statement through the phone to Melissa, but looked at Bill to ask him a question with the same words. "So, you want to come out tonight and have Bill meet you at the station in Bridgeport around ten?" As Melissa affirmed that was what she had said, Gloria watched Bill make a *'why not'* face and shrug his shoulders, then nod his agreement. "Sounds okay, Sure, he'd be happy to do it."

Bill stood up and after pointing downstairs, he pinched the lapel of the robe and rustled it, while silently mouthing, "I'll get the dryer." *'This is the first time you're leaving this kitchen and going down those stairs without feeling that you're running for your life. So, start getting a firm inkling of a way to do exactly that. Just pay attention and put the pieces together.'* In one motion, Bill picked up his coffee cup, stood up, nodded, smiled, and headed downstairs to pack his clothes. As he moved smoothly past her without any further contact or comment Gloria heard Melissa's voice. "Gloria? Are you still there?"

"Yes. Just got distracted a minute. Hey look. That's fine. Ten's plenty of time. I've got a little Pinto station wagon now. It has a vanity plate. It reads GLO - 1. Someone else got to the State for the full GLORIA plate I wanted."

The A.D.A. remarked, "Probably some minister or born-again Christian some else in the State."

"By the way, what does the love of your life there have for a last name. I just now remember you called him Gene. But that's all I recall."

A slight hesitation. "Matherson." Another pause. "It's Matherson. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I don't know. I may make names tags or something later while I'm waiting for you to get back from the station. Gloria had no conscious realization of why she even began this train of discussion. So, she was equally puzzled at Melissa's response, because it was made so purposefully: "Don't make them until we see you, okay!" said the A.D.A.

"How's that, Melissa. What do you mean?" cross-examined Gloria; switching the tables on the A.D.A.

"Umm. I mean . . . we'll help you with them. It'll give us all something to do as we sit around tonight. We'll probably be too keyed up from the ride to go right to bed anyway."

It sounded plausible to Gloria, so she agreed, "Okay." She let the topic drop. "See you later, then."

"Yes. Yes. We'll see you later." Melissa's voice trailed off as if to say goodbye; then caught and rose. "Oh yeah. Hey, Gloria. Wait. Don't hang up. How will Bill recognize us?" Another pause and it sounded like she covered the receiver with her hand. "Right, Gloria have Bill stay by the car you described so we have no trouble finding him. Okay?"

"Sure. I'll tell him." And as she was hanging up the phone, Gloria looked at the receiver in her hand as if she were staring, by proxy, at the people on the other end. Gloria heard the phone click down at the other end at the same time she heard a door shut downstairs. The closing of that door made her miss hearing the second click from the other end of the phone. Bill's footsteps were heading back up to the kitchen. "I don't believe it," she said to him.

"What's that?" asked Bill.

"We were just talking about Melissa Rodriguez and here she calls on the phone. Says she and her date are going to come up tonight and can we pick them up at the train."

"Yes. I got that drift from your side messaging."

"You're okay with that?"

"Yes. Certainly. How does one do that around here? What train? The flatness of his questions did not betray Bill's emotions or preoccupations.

"She said she'd come into Bridgeport. It's not too far a ride from here. But now I'll never get everything done for tomorrow."

"Well, show me how to go. I know how to use your car, you know. And you know what? I'll try not to run into them when I get there."

"What? Oh, nice! How are you going to recognize them anyway?"

"I thought you could tell me that, Gloria. Did she say? Are they going to wear a carnation in their lapels or something? I love that touch. It's a sign of class. Greeting people with an unspoken, yet refined, and impossible to misunderstand, message with flowers."

Gloria smiled at him. So different from the morning. "No. I told them what my car looks like and the license plate. She said if you stood by the car they would find you."

“That sounds pretty fair. And if I have to go to the bathroom, I’ll just leave them a note under the windshield wiper.” He almost smirked as he said it.

“Oh, terrific. Just what I need. Late night arrivals a day early and a house guest chauffeur who’s trying to become a stand-up comic to cheer me up. Where did you suddenly get the one-liners?” She was exasperated. The Rodriguez woman had upset her, and her hopes for the night, no matter how much of a long shot they were—now that things had become defused at dinner. She had still been holding out a small glimmer of hope that a more casual evening might lead to the same happy ending. But it looked like Stokes knew the pressure was off and was grateful for an escape. “You’ll have to leave a good twenty-five minutes to get there.”

Hearing the crestfallen spirit turning to smoldering anger in her voice, Stokes tried to make it up to her, “Are there any other things you need for tomorrow? If there’s an all-night place along the way, I could get you what you want. Two crows on the fence with one trick shot.”

“There are a few things I forgot.”

“Write it up. I’ll go downstairs to tidy up a bit. They can use that room. I’ll use your couch up here, if it’s available,” he teased. “And I’ll get ready to go.”

She watched the red robe disappear down the staircase and obediently began to work on a shopping list. She’d never thought of the couch. Why did he, all of a sudden? To avoid sleeping up even one additional floor? Or, not? A thought struck her as she began to write. “Oh, hey Bill. I found out his name.”

“Whose name?” came the reply.

“Melissa’s latest flame.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

She called down the name. She thought he stopped in his tracks at the name, but maybe he had just gotten to the bottom of the staircase.

After some time, Bill returned, dressed as he was that morning, except for the long coat. She went back to it again. “I can’t help thinking that it’s a familiar name, Bill. What do you think? Have you heard it before?” She was trying to go back on the offensive against the evening’s interlopers. Something still gnawed at her from the phone exchange.

“I don’t know. Didn’t you say he was some kind of big shot? Maybe you saw it in a newspaper or in one of your magazines somewhere.”

“Don’t know for sure.” She just couldn’t recall.

Bill's reply echoed Gloria's earlier prediction. "Well, you'll have plenty of time to find out. I'm sure they'll be a multitude stories to tell when they get here, especially about why they changed their plans. Did she give you a hint about why they are coming tonight?"

"No. She said they were going to come tomorrow. I told her you were here. Then she said they had car trouble and wanted to avoid a delay in the morning." She recounted the facts faithfully, as best as she remembered them.

"Oh, well."

"Hey, do you know how to tell if a cantaloupe is ripe?"

"Is this a riddle or something, Gloria?"

"No. I need you to get me some when you stop at the store on the way to the train station. I wanted to make sure you knew, so I could use them first thing in the morning."

Bill knew she couldn't see him. He shook his head as he quietly padded upstairs on the carpeted steps. He was amazed at the change that had come over their conversation.

And for her own part, after reviewing her pantry and cabinets, Gloria couldn't believe she was finishing writing out a shopping list for Bill Stokes, like he belonged in the house or something. Yet, it seemed within the last hour to be a quite natural thing to do. As natural as his comment about discussions and conversations and their experience of talking to one another throughout dinner. These things made her feel she should just let time take its course and she would learn all about Bill Stokes this weekend anyway. She seemed to find more success when she wasn't prying. Wasn't that what she should expect from a reunion weekend? She busied herself thinking about getting ready for her early company and gave up all thoughts of trying on her own to discover anything more about Bill Stokes for now.

And then that couch thing snuck back into her mind.

v

With about fifteen minutes left until the time the train was due in, Bill Stokes looked through the window of the station wagon and saw all the groceries stacked and bagged neatly on the rear seat. Bridgeport, Connecticut. It was a little bit like New London, which had served him well before. There were busses, trains and even ferries. One of these would be his way out. And now all he had left to decide was whether he wanted to see Melissa Rodriguez and Eugene Matherson; or just imagine that they found their way to the car. A few minutes passed, in which time, if he were a smoker, Bill Stokes would have had a cigarette. He dared not leave the station wagon alone too long. But he also could not afford

to linger for any early arrivals. The loudspeaker announced the train's approach, due in the station in just eight minutes.

He opened the door, sat behind the wheel, wrote the short note, folded it in half, picked up his bag, stepped out of the car, locked the door behind him, tucked the note under the wiper blade, walked down along the side of the car, opened the gas cap lid, took the key, and from his store-bought roll taped the key to the inside of the gas cap lid, just like the note said, closed the door, and walked off into the night.

vi

Gloria heard the car drive in and fluttered about the kitchen fixing a few last things. She reached the last clean glass up into the cabinet. Somehow, one had gone missing, misplaced. She couldn't help forgetting that she almost didn't care what the kitchen looked like earlier that day when she brought Bill Stokes home. However, now a woman was coming. A person she looked down on a bit at school, but who was far more successful than her as an adult. Gloria just wanted everything to be perfect.

There was a bumping noise at the door, made by an arm and an elbow as it sounded, rather than a firm knock. Gloria opened the door and saw her two guests. Each cradled a bag of groceries on one arm and held an overnight bag in the other hand. She noticed the attorney had traveled in her pressed, grey business slacks and white blouse, with a tailored black jacket and low grey pumps.

"Hello, Melissa. Hi, I'm Gloria. You must be Gene." The ungainly ritual of smiles, hugs, handshakes, and greetings took about a minute and a half. Looking at their overnight "go bags" and the grocery sacks, Gloria said, "Good. Thanks, Where's the rest?"

"The rest?" Gene Matherson asked. "This was all."

"Well, wh . . . where's Bill?" stammered Gloria.

"That's what you were hoping you could tell us." It was Melissa's voice Gloria heard managing to drift through her surprise and nervousness, as she looked past them and out into the driveway.

Gloria could only muster a blank stare at the newcomers and ask, "What do you mean? He went to meet you. You have the car and the groceries. What happened? Where is he?"

The assistant district attorney was not so used to being interrogated, so she began slowly and with the facts as she knew them to be. "You described the car over the phone. We got to the station, and we didn't see anybody . . ."

Gloria interrupted. "Don't tell me you left him there. He said if he had to go to the bathroom or something, he'd leave a note on the windshield."

Gene Matherson spoke up. "In fact, Gloria, he did leave a note on the windshield. This is it." As he drew the folded paper out of his suit jacket pocket, it occurred to Gloria that he was still wearing a nicely fitted business suit, though he had removed his tie. He stood a few inches taller than six feet, had neatly trimmed hair and was clean shaven.

"What does it say?" Gloria was stunned and trying to choose between anger and dismay.

The labor leader cleared his throat and read the note aloud without any dramatic interpretation. "HI. GUYS. WELCOME TO THE REUNION. TWO BAGS OF GROCERIES ARE FOR GLORIA. KEY INSIDE GAS FILL COVER. GIVE MY BEST TO GLORIA. REGARDS. And there is no signature. In fact, the whole things printed to avoid being a handwriting sample." He held up another paper. This one Gloria recognized. "We simply backtracked these directions to the station from your house to get here."

"What? Let me see that!" Gloria almost grabbed the windshield note from him. Melissa and Gene were shocked at the urgency of her reading. Gloria read the note two or three times before looking up at her company. "But this can't be. How can this be. All his things are packed and still in the downstairs bedroom. Come with me. We'll put your things down in the guest room and we'll find where his things are."

The groceries kept sentinel on the yellow formica countertop, while the three descended the stairs. They went past the washer and dryer and into the guest room. On the neatly made bed, the sweat suit and bathrobe were precisely folded. There was no bag. There was no sign that Bill Stokes had been there.

"Why. I don't understand. I don't get it. This is unreal. Let's go back upstairs. Leave you bags here. I need a cup of tea." She walked away without really finishing a complete thought.

Despite the clock's claim that it was almost an hour before midnight, Gloria looked around and felt the kitchen doppelganged its late-morning awkwardness. True there were three people—not two. But again, there was food in bags—but it would be put away, uneaten. As far as heroes went, she just didn't know anything. Just that only time might tell. Yet, she had no one to ask. No one to put a name on this. And questions still haunted her.

The water set on to boil, Gloria turned to face Melissa Rodriguez and Eugene Matherson. "I don't know what to make of this. I don't know what to say. I haven't seen Bill Stokes in years. I go to New York. Almost run him over. I bring him to my home. He's a nervous wreck at first. He helps me fix up the place for the reunion. He was here. In this house. At that table. We had dinner. You guys called. He went to get you. And now he's gone, simply gone. I don't get it. It's unreal."

Matherson spoke up first. "You mean you just ran into him in New York? He was coming unannounced? Your meeting him was an accident?"

Gloria almost began to laugh hysterically. She grabbed herself first by crossing her arms across her chest. She shivered. Then she raised her hands to her mouth, without covering her eyes, to keep from laughing and crying alternately. She looked at her two guests who could only peer back at her. Then she exploded. "Ran into him? Met him by accident? Hell. I nearly ran him down with my car outside Penn Station! I had no idea he was coming. And you know what? Looking back on it now that he's gone . . . I bet he didn't even know about the reunion."

"Why do you say that?" asked Rodriguez. Her voice was soft, yet firm. Practiced in squad room toughness and courtroom manners, her listeners never knew if she was friend or foe. Melissa's look made Gloria's skin crawl. She had hoped her old schoolmate would console her, not try to verify her story.

And this friend of hers. Why was he pacing the room like a caged feline of some kind? His eyes betrayed a racing mind and a man calculating catching some kind of prey. She turned to ask him what his problem was, but he spoke first.

"You really think he didn't know?" And before he could say anything else, Rodriguez interrupted. Sweetly. But nonetheless, interrupted.

"Gene. Not now. Gloria's had quite a shock. Let's get our things arranged downstairs, let Gloria wash her face with some cold water, and we'll talk when the water's done for tea." And turning to Gloria, "How does that sound? Okay?"

Gloria nodded and turned the heat under the tea lower. She picked up the grocery bag to set some things away before going to her room, as her guests headed downstairs. Looking into the bag she saw the name tags and the party favors inside. She heard the echo of Stokes' voice in her dinnertime memory. *'It just wouldn't do, not to know who you were talking to, now, would it?'* She couldn't stop the smile from insidiously sneaking onto her face. "And who was I talking to all day, Bill Stokes?" There was no one to hear the question. Nor to answer it.

Before any phantom listener would have had time to answer, Gloria heard her name being called from downstairs. She moved to the top of the stairs and heard Melissa calling again, asking for her to come down. Gloria found them both in the guest room Bill had used. A few drawers and the closet door were opened. "What's going on?" was all Gloria heard her voice asking. She was upset by what looked like a search of the room.

"We found this envelope with a hundred-dollar bill inside . . ." It was Matherson's voice, but he was still looking in the closet, especially at the door handle.

"The only people who've been in here today other than me is my sister and Bill Stokes." No one asked, but it seemed to Gloria to be the thing to say.

Matherson again spoke up. "Can you call your sister and thank her for the money. Make something up like it wasn't necessary for her to do that. You know the way. Just to see if she left it."

"I could. Sure. But why? Melissa. What's going on here? This is getting kind of creepy." Gloria was trying to make up her mind to select which of the emotions seething within her was going to win out. She was confused and angry. But mostly. She was hurt. Something had happened today. She knew it didn't happen between her and Bill Stokes. But it sure did happen within herself. And it was because of Bill Stokes. And now these equally strange people looked like they were tearing her guest room apart. However neatly and unobtrusively it appeared, they were searching her house.

"Gloria, these were under the pillow of the bed. I went to turn the bed down, and found them." Melissa Rodriguez was back in control. "But," she turned to Matherson as she went on, "your sister wouldn't have told you to cancel your credit card." She pointed to a note on the inside of an envelope Matherson was too busy to investigate, but which Rodriguez had turned inside out and lain flat on the bed. It looked like a ransom note and smelled of spray starch. Someone had torn the word 'cancel' out of a magazine ad, along with a picture of a MasterCard icon from another ad and ironed them onto the inside of the envelope.

The tall man intoned sarcastically, "I'd say it was our boy Stokes who did this."

"Hey, Melissa." Gloria's abruptness caught all their attention. Including Gloria's own. "What does he mean 'our boy' when he says that? What is all this about? I'm leaving 'confused' behind and moving right on up to 'angry' here."

"Do you have credit cards? Particularly, do you have a MasterCard? Because that's what this note says." Rodriguez got as equally abrupt. Her squad room voice was tougher, because she wasn't weighed down by confusion.

"They're upstairs, In my bag. In the kitchen." And they all went upstairs. Her brown leather billfold was still in her handbag. As Gloria snapped it open and flipped through the pockets, she found the space where the card usually rested was empty. So was the look she gave to the Assistant D. A. for the district of Manhattan and the labor leader who came in tow behind her up the stairs.

"That tears it." Matherson was really pacing now. "I can't believe I just missed this guy. After all these years, I should have known it was too good. That it was too easy. I've got some calls to make." He turned toward the stairs. "I'll use my credit cards for the calls, don't worry."

"Let me know when you're done. I'll have to let my people know, too." Melissa's voice was dejected.

The teapot screeched and both women jumped at the sudden alarm. "What the hell is this all about?" Almost screaming now, Gloria pleaded. "Why am I the only one who doesn't know what's going on around here? In my own home?"

Melissa took a seat at the table, accepted the tea without comment, and began speaking quietly. "Bill Stokes is a very wanted man." Melissa Rodriguez saw a startled, but wistful, look in her hostess' eyes. "Not that way, Gloria. Good thing you didn't fall for him. He'd only bring you trouble." Riding's silence let her continue, in the same controlled pace.

"Bill Stokes is wanted by the police. But he is also wanted by organized crime. He can tell the police quite a bit about the mob's connections with legitimate businesses, especially in construction and the building trades. But he just won't do it. He's trying to protect somebody. But no one knows who that somebody is. No one knows if it's a lover, a member of his family, an undercover cop, or a crime boss. All seem plausible because of his silence. All seem possible because of his knack for keeping away from both the police and the mob. He's been in hiding for over four years now. Every once in a while, word of his surfacing comes up, but always after he's gone. He worked in migrant camps on Long Island, he's cut grass along the highways of New Jersey, he's farmed in Pennsylvania and Connecticut. He's clearly good enough to disappear for months at a time. It's a mystery why he stays in the Northeast though. It would figure he'd cut and run. Mexico. Europe. Canada. He's got contacts in all three places. But he stays near New York for reasons that no one's been able to figure out. Not the cops. Not the feds. Not the syndicates."

Gloria took the opening as Rodriguez pursed her dry lips, blew on her cup, and sipped her tea, no sugar or milk. "Well, if you're the law . . . then who's Matherson . . . the mob?"

Rodriguez laughed back through her herbal tea. "No. Not quite. He's big in labor. He and I just hit it off. He does most of his representing of unions over in Jersey. I'm strictly Manhattan based, so we hardly ever deal with the same people. I think Bill Stokes is the only guy we both really have anything to do with. In different ways."

Again at the sip of tea, Gloria asked, "How so?"

Rodriguez breathed in deeply. "You can't say you know this information. And you can't say I told it to you. It's my job. But it might be your life."

"So it's not social gossip for tomorrow night's *'and what have you been doing since graduation'* exchanges? quipped Gloria. "Look, Melissa, I'm still smarting and now I feel insulted on top of that."

"Hardly. Look. All law enforcement groups confronting organized crime know that Bill Stokes was hurt by the mob. He had two businesses ruined because he wouldn't pay kickbacks at contract negotiation time six years ago. After that, he also refused to pay protection for those places of business. He lost intimidated laborers at crucial times for

competitive production at one of them. And the other had a fire that was totally devastating, right as he was about to complete a huge contract order that represented about seven months of his time, energy, staff, and capital. His two remaining operating concerns seem too much under a microscope to be disrupted with impunity. Though he's not on site to conduct their business, his loyal employees keep them running profitably. No fewer than six States' Attorneys General want him to testify."

"So why doesn't he?"

"What will they offer him? No one knows what he wants. They just know he's after something. And even if they found him. Even if he testified. He'd be a dead man. They have nothing to offer him. He's been his own best witness protection program. No one's been able to find him for more than three and a half years of hard trying. But he keeps staying around."

"What's labor's interest. Who's Matherson using my phone to call? Why was he so mad?" Gloria felt her questions were logical, but they oddly seemed to catch the A.D.A. off guard.

"I came up to your home because of my work as soon as I heard he was here. I was in such a hurry I thought I'd just be dragging Gene along a day early for the reunion."

His footsteps on the basement stairs couldn't have been more timely. Gene Matherson took the stairs two at a time and was in the kitchen before Rodriguez could give it any more reflection. Gloria thought his face looked strained, and he was more in charge of his emotions as it appeared to her. He looked directly at her. Gloria felt he was accusing her of something as he told her point blank, eye to eye. "There are a lot of choices he could make from Bridgeport. There's the train. There are busses. And cabs. Airport limos back to New York for either JFK or LaGuardia. And then there's the ferry that goes across to Port Jeff. But I've got him. He's used your card twice already. He bought an Amtrak ticket from New Haven to Greenfield, Mass. Insulting bastard probably jumped on the same train we got off. That's less than \$ 100. But he bought an Air Canada ticket from Montreal to Detroit." Then he turned as harshly on Melissa Rodriguez and kept going, "That puts him way over the \$ 100 he left downstairs. And it puts him onto an international flight with a stolen credit card. Your office should be able to bag him for that. After all this time, finally, we have him."

Gloria Riding stared at the man. To her, he looked a little crazed over the whole thing. At first, he seemed distraught that Bill Stokes was missing. Now he had the look of bloodlust at the thought of his pursuit and capture. Deep down it didn't seem to be right. It didn't ring true. Not about the man she just expended a ton of energy on that day. Gloria needed to react. And she did. Since Stokes wasn't around, Matheson got it. "Hey, just a damn minute! What do you mean he used my credit card twice already?"

"He did, lady." He snarled and pointed his finger at Gloria's face. "I checked." And before he could trumpet his achievement into a full-blown triumph, she cut in.

“Stop right there. I’m not talking about Bill Stokes. I’m talking about you. I know Bill Stokes. Went to school with him. Had lunch with him today. He cleaned my garage. He mowed my lawn. He shared my dinner. The first real man . . . And God knows, if I had my way, I’d be sharing my bed with him right now. But he wouldn’t have done the last. Don’t ask me why I know. I just do. No sweat. My loss. Not his.” She had their attention now. It was her kitchen, and she was holding court.

“Now *you*, on the other hand. I don’t know you. Never met you. Only know your name. If it is your name. You’re just like the rest. What do you mean by checking into my credit cards? I won’t even ask *how* you did it. But I’m sure waiting to hear *why* you did. What else did you check on about me? You’ve been gone a long time. And who are you anyway?” And before he could answer, Gloria spun on Rodriguez, who herself was quite taken aback by the exchange. She’d seen spurned women before. But this was way more. “You’re the law in here, Melissa. How can this guy you just brought into my home just pick up my phone and ask about my credit cards? You said you just brought him along a day early for the party, as a date. Looks to me like he wants to throw a party all by himself. With Bill Stokes as the invited guest. What is all this? I’m going upstairs to wash my face, like you said. When I come down, I either want you guys gone or I want some answers.”

With more grace than she thought she had any right to expect she could work up, Gloria Riding strode out of her kitchen and into the hall beyond their sight. She made the stairs and her bathroom on the second floor. But not without trembling. Not without wanting to throw up. Not without looking at her eyes in the mirror and seeing within them a sense of rage sprung from stung pride and swollen with fought-back tears. She clutched the sink for strength just as her legs gave way under the stress. Gloria Riding eased herself to the floor and sat on the bathmat by her tub. If she hadn’t done so that very second, she would have collapsed and probably landed in the tub or crashed her head against the tub as she fell. Her legs were gone. She pivoted across her hips and knelt against the side of the tub. She reached over and turned on the faucet. She let the water course along the back of her hair and her neck, spread across both her shoulders and down her back onto and into her clothes. The stark cold made her shudder and brought her blood back to flowing. She pivoted again, let herself down lightly on the bathmat, looked up, and lowered her eyelids most of the way. The small light on the ceiling looked far away. Gloria closed her eyes.

vii

Out on Long Island Sound, the water spread back from the bow of the ferry from Bridgeport to Port Jefferson. At that point on the forward deck where you could stand and look across to the North Shore of Long Island, Bill Stokes rode the last boat of the night. Cross Sound’s weekend summer schedule was set fifteen minutes after the 10:00 arrival of the Amtrak. The departure was on time, just as the agent said when Stokes phoned from the supermarket. He saw the blinking red and green lights on the channel markers and

heard the eleven o'clock chimes from some church across the still water. From memory, Bill planned a walking route that would take him out to harvest grapes on the north fork. If chased, from there he could affect an escape by ferry from Orient Point back across to New London or by the LIRR from Greenport back toward the City and beyond.

Stokes could make out fast-moving lights to the west, his right, as he looked over the bow. They moved swiftly, with enough speed to overtake the ferry and block its path. But their size was insufficient to stand up to the four-story mass carrying hundreds of people and three decks of cars heading out for an early autumn weekend or for Saturday morning deliveries. It turned out they were cars on the shore road. Things look so different at night. By day this approach to the ferry slip would be filled with visions of buildings, shoreline sand, and boats tied to piers. Behind them would be green rolling mounds that started in moderate dunes at the shore and grew past the towns on the water's edge. And these would be succeeded by the rich, forested hills left behind by the glacier that scoured the Sound between what were now New York and Connecticut. But by night, it was a harsh break of water and land. The night breeze only lightly lifted the waters to create a tidal swell of waves, nowhere near significant enough to deter the monstrosity of this ferry ploughing its way through them. The lights of the boat illuminated the slack tide and calm surface to starboard and port. Seagulls bobbed atop the swells and a tern or two swept through the lighted sky as they tested their wings and decided whether to cross tonight or wait for the warmer air of morning.

Bill Stokes had always left places soon enough in the past. He had never felt actively chased in the last five years, though he knew people were looking for him. Increasingly in numbers and frequency in the last three-and-a-half especially. Many people. People he wanted no part of. So, he didn't really have a pattern established that would lead Matherson or Rodriguez to go south in pursuit when he left a trail that suggested he'd head north. Beyond the relief of escape, he felt a twinge of suspense. It was different from any feeling he'd known before. Different from the relief of getting away from Gloria Riding. It would take a long time to get over this day. He thought he had prepared for such things to happen. To have someone recognize him in more than a passing way. For the law enforcement community to find him. For the others to know where he was. But until today he had no idea how he would respond.

As he had prepared for such things to happen, he always thought they would happen one at a time, not all together in one day. He turned and walked along the deck toward the stern. He sat between the twin stacks, sleekly raked back toward the Connecticut shore, belching some noisy and noisome dark grey smoke into the night sky. He wasn't familiar enough with the coast to identify each cluster of lights as a given town or structure. He thought he could still discern which group was Bridgeport. Where he had left the car at the railroad, walked up the northbound platform, gotten to the western end and gone over the rail and down the maintenance ladder. Where he heard the crunch of bluestone under his feet as he made his way to the electrical panels just down from the station. Where wearing his orange reflective vest put him outside the concern of other travelers. Where he turned into the line of bushes, swept the vest off and into his carry bag, slipped on his long coat, just in time to emerge from the shrubs and walk down the dirt slope and into the parking

lot for the ferry. From where he ambled across all the lines of waiting cars, to the pedestrian waiting platform at the base of the ferry slip.

That's all he knew. That he had gotten away. And in getting away, he hoped he had left behind some reasons for them to leave him alone for a while.

He got up unhurriedly and walked back amidships. He looked up to see what stars wheeled the sky as one day revolved into another. A night of freedom had emerged from his day of near capture. Bill Stokes adjusted his eyesight to the dark universe above to perceive his favorite late summer supergiant, Deneb. He was attracted to its reputation as one of the most distant and most luminous stars in the galaxy.

viii

She opened her eyes. The ceiling light was brighter and closer than moments before. Gloria gradually stood up, stripped off all her clothes, threw them in the tub, and turned off the faucet. For a moment she just looked at herself in the mirror. She wondered if what she perceived was what others saw when they looked at her. Maybe she'd find that out as people started arriving for a reunion twenty years in the making. She walked to her closet and wrapped herself in her favorite robe. She almost missed seeing it, in her resolve to get back downstairs. But there it was. How did it get there? She hadn't brought it up.

She sat and reviewed the guest list in the light of her bedside lamp. It was her guest list and then again it wasn't her guest list. On the front side of the paper was her guest list—a copy of the one downstairs on the dining room table where she had hoped they were all going to make name tags together. This was an earlier copy of the list she'd left in the laundry several weeks before when she was starting to organize things. But the back of the sheet was now filled with names and lists and numbers and dates that were not in her handwriting.

She scanned it quickly and noticed Bill Stokes' name in three of the lists. He was there as owner of two businesses. He was there again as a trustee for what seemed to be some employee retirement accounts. But alongside each of the listings were names of people identified with a heading as union stewards and labor organization trustees, and a strange untitled arrangement of what appeared to be nicknames. Off to the side in the margin was a neat column of a series of numbers, with the abbreviation ACCT# above them as a heading. And then he saw it. Gene Matherson's name. But it was on two lists. One was a labor organization and the other was next to the nickname lists. And under his name near the nicknames were another set of numbers. Over half of these had check marks next to them. Gloria's eyes darted back and forth across the page. Each of the numbers which had a check mark next to it under Matherson's name was a number that appeared in the column in the margin. It didn't make sense to her. But she knew to whom it would. At the bottom of the sheet was drawn a simple flower, a carnation. At that, she knew whose handwriting it was. Who else could remember so many names? So many numbers? Now she would use it as a life skill herself.

As Gloria Riding quietly padded down the carpeted staircase, she heard the lawyer and the labor leader. It sounded as if they were arguing. They were obviously no closer to the answer Gloria pressed as an ultimatum when she had gone upstairs a quarter of an hour before. Matherson's voice was so loud that Gloria was flooded with a series of interconnected mental images (from childhood: her father screaming at her to get up, even as she was still falling to the floor under the power of his attack . . . from adulthood: her husband slamming her into a wall). The impact of the images was to slow her down and make her become instinctively quiet and cautious, for no distinct reason she understood at the moment. Another unreasoned instinct arose with a voice within; a voice that for a split second sounded like Bill Stokes' voice: *Hold back and just listen*. Her instincts were rewarded beyond her wildest imaginings.

Matherson's voice carried, "We came right away because you wanted this guy. Now what comes next? He's gone."

"We can't just leave. You don't walk out in a person in the middle of the night. See things aren't what you expect. And then leave without having a lot more of explaining to do than I intend. And I don't want to give myself away. So we stay." Rodriguez's tone was not an angry one, though Matherson's had an edge on it.

"What is this, Lisa? A refresher course from Emily Post? Like I need one, or something? What did you expect from this guy anyhow?"

Unruffled, the trial attorney's measured reply shocked Gloria, almost making her slip off the edge of the stair. She remained poised as she stretched to hear the voices from around the corner. "I expected a chance to hang out on the edges of his conversations, without him realizing it. I wanted an opportunity to listen to his answers to questions about what he's been doing since graduation. I wanted to hear who he's been with, where he's been, and his plans for the next year. I wanted to know how to get at him or get to him, whichever I needed. I hoped to get a feel for whether he's clean or dirty. He's been so wrapped up in places where the mob's infiltrated labor union after labor union that it gets hard to tell which side of the structural steel he's climbing."

Matherson cut in. "I thought you said you wanted this Stokes character in jail. Where are you going with this, Lisa? What are you looking for? What's this guy bring to the table?"

Her voice began to get edgy, but still was not raised. "He must bring something to the bargaining table. Bill Stokes negotiated several labor contracts six years ago. For his own companies and for those run by associates. He's good, apparently. Broke log jams where others failed, other skilled negotiators. I want to know if that's because he makes people connect or because he's connected to the wrong people."

Her date interrupted her again before she could go on. "So what's the deal. Why is it important? All of us know sometimes you get lucky, or charmed, or something. You run in streaks. Sounds to me like he just hit a couple of home runs with the companies and the

unions and then faded away. He had his day. Now it's passed. He's history. What's the deal?"

"The deal is," Melissa caught herself talking louder than she wanted. "The deal is," now more quietly, "that I need answers to questions like those Gloria was asking earlier tonight. Only she's asking them into her teacup. I can't afford to be looking like I'm reading tea leaves about Bill Stokes."

Matherson almost physically jumped at the image. "What? You see this guy in your future, or something?"

Rodriguez couldn't help but hear an uncomfortable cut to his voice. "That bothers you? I'm not talking about dating him. So why should it bother you?"

"It's just that" . . . he searched for a safe retreat, however disingenuous . . . "I don't like seeing you upset about your work stuff . . ."

She stopped him cold in his escape, insulted. By his being disingenuous. But mostly for something else. "That's right, Gene. It is my work stuff. *My* work stuff. Not yours. I stay out of your union business. You stay out of my legal business. That's the deal we have, Gene. You told me that when we started seeing each other. '*Take it or leave it*' was your way of placing that condition on our relationship. And it works both ways, Gene. So, back off. But before you do, while you're into my business—where the hell do you get off checking out Riding's credit cards?"

Matherson's voice was flat. He was not sounding like a scolded lover. "Why the hell not? I want this guy. Bad!"

"So do we at the D.A.'s office. But not with illegal means. I can't call and have cops on the lookout for him based on the way you got that information. I'll never get an arrest warrant—let alone a conviction for anything we find out about him later."

"News flash for you . . . *sweetheart*. I don't want any police there when he's cornered. He owes people in a big way, and they want a word or two with him before the police can arrest him."

"You make it sound as if he'll need the police to protect him."

"As slow on the uptake as you seem, he may need the services of another county employee. Like one from the coroner's office."

"Gene. I've never heard you talk like this to me. All these last seven months, I thought I was the one hunting Bill Stokes. I thought you were just being polite, or gentlemanly . . ."

"Or maybe, counselor, you were hoping something else. Well I assure you; it wasn't something else. And now that I've found him, you won't have any cause for confusion."

"What do you mean? You aren't . . . ? We weren't . . . ?"

Hearing the approaching car, Matheson finished it, and her, off quite curtly. "What we *were* wasn't what you thought. And what we *are* isn't anything like what you let yourself believe we *could be*."

"Where are you going?"

"Unless that's Bill Stokes coming back, then that's my ride. Before your classmate invited us to leave, I'd already arranged for my ride out of here. Have a good night. And . . . do please express my regrets for missing the reunion. I've got one of my own to attend."

ix

Gloria Riding came around the corner into the kitchen in time to see Gene Matherson leave by the same door she watched Bill Stokes disappear through a little over three hours earlier. "Well," she said clearing her throat to give Melissa's tear-stained face a chance to recover before they had to look eye to eye. "I'm ready for another cup of tea. How about you?"

"What? No. Thanks. I've got to go. There's too much to explain. I'm sorry. It must seem so rude. But there's no way I could possibly begin to handle this any other way. I'll need to borrow your phone to call for a ride, please. It seems," she glanced toward the door, "that I'm without an escort."

"That's not all you're without." Now it was Gloria who didn't raise her voice. Hers was calm and quiet, in counterpoint to Melissa's. Hers was getting faster paced and higher pitched as she pinched each short statement out of her throat. She fought back the sobs gathering with the force of a fall storm on Long Island Sound.

"What do you mean?" The attorney's voice was choky and quizzical, bereft of its prosecutorial force.

"I mean that there's a few things you *don't* know. About Bill Stokes. About Gene Matherson."

"And how would you know. Six hours ago, you didn't even know Gene's name." The courtroom lunge was half back in her retort.

"I actually don't know. But apparently Bill Stokes *does*."

"But he's long gone. Or is he still here?"

"Yes. And no. He's gone. But *this*," holding up the list of names, "remains."

"What is that?"

"This is what we're going to read over our next cup of tea. And after that, maybe we'll sample some of the drink I bought for the party."

"Tell me some more. You obviously have my attention. How did you know that Stokes knew us?"

"I didn't. Not until I went upstairs just now. You see, I only went up there once since early today. It was just before dinner—to change my shirt. But that's a story for another time. At some point after that, Bill must have gone up there. Probably while, or after, I talked to you on the phone. I called down the stairs to him and told him Gene's last name. I couldn't place it at the time, but thinking back over it now, I think I heard him stop dead in his tracks when I said Matherson's name. It was right after 'The Call' that he must have gotten all his things together to leave. He had gone down to take his laundry out of the dryer. You asked for a ride. He offered to buy some last-minute things I needed. It gave him the perfect excuse and an avenue of escape. I guess he distracted me by having me check my supplies and make him a shopping list.

"Of course, until you and Gene told me the things you did about Bill, I didn't know any of that either. But putting it all together now, this paper makes sense. This paper names names, lists lists, and—unless I miss my guess—would show someone who knows what they, or *she*, is looking for, that Gene Matherson is included in lists of labor unions on one hand and lists for organized crime on the other. And maybe even has a numbered bank account somewhere for all his trouble."

"Come on, Gloria, you're reading too many detective novels or watching too much television."

"All I'm reading, Melissa, is three people's faces and this piece of paper. Here. Sit down. Let's look it over. Then we can decide whether I want to give it to you or if I'm going to burn it and deny I ever saw it. Along with denying that Bill Stokes was ever here in my house today."

"The police can track that he was here you know."

"Not that you'd really ask them to. But for what it's worth, I just figured something else out as you said that. Every garden machine and tool that Stokes touched while he was here? He wore gloves in the garden and garage. He made a point of washing every plate and glass he used. I thought he was just being polite or something. And I found a pair of latex dishwashing gloves in the laundry when we were just downstairs with Gene. But I never

use any of the ones that are in the cabinets down there anymore. Funny what you miss when you've no reason to be looking for it.

"At the ophthalmologist's office where I work, we call it 'social cataracts.' It's when you won't focus on, or can't see, what's right in front of you. Just the fuzzy stuff around the edges come into view."

The A.D.A. withdrew her objection. "You win. I wouldn't have called the police anyway. Because right now, if that paper is what you say it is, I may forget all about Bill Stokes for a while and start hunting down my friend, Mr. Matherson, instead. My boss said he's after an arrest in this case before the spring contracting season starts up again. Won't we all be surprised when it isn't Bill Stokes, but our chummy Mr. Gene, who's on the way to the bail bondsman?"

x

An hour after sunrise, the kitchen table in Gloria Riding's house looked like it never had before. There was no yellow to be seen. It was covered with sheaves of white bond paper. "Good thing I bought this ream of copy paper for everyone to write their bios on at the reunion," Gloria remembered telling Melissa somewhere between three and four o'clock in the morning.

They were quite a sight, the two of them. Gloria still in just her favorite blue bathrobe and white slippers. Melissa in the orange and blue METS jogging suit she had packed for an exercise run before the reunion.

Off to the end of the table sat the all-powerful Hewlett-Packard Vectra Portable CS laptop. Along with the printer from Gloria's home computer and her phone, they had used the Vectra and its brain: for a keyboard, and a facsimile machine, and a legal office all through the early morning hours. They had never studied together in school. Never gone to a "sleep-over" together. But the former classmates had just shared their inaugural "all-nighter." For the first time since midnight, they exhaled and sat back to greet the new day.

The last six hours were a whirlwind. Melissa's administrative assistant roused her counterpart at home at one a.m. and borrowed the Vectra from the US Attorney's office in New Haven. Gloria used it to keyboard all the information from Stokes' list within the first hour. The Manhattan DA's investigator on the night shift secured all the phone numbers Matherson called from Gloria's house. He called them over to her at Gloria's for inclusion in the documents being readied for court. Melissa then faxed all the material to one of her now-equally-tired prosecutors, having awakened him also just after one a.m. at his home. He in turn provided the lists to a hastily assembled skeleton crew in Manhattan. And they prepared the proper papers to secure the appropriate search warrants from a 'sympathetic judge' who Melissa awakened at his home around 2 a.m.

The same night staff acquired the contracts with those uncontested warrants. They faxed them through to Gloria's house for she and Melissa to scour. Simultaneously, they were wired to a forensic accountant in the FBI's Bronx office and to another in Newark. Conference calls over two hours linked them all with the additional staffers arriving at Melissa's office in Manhattan. Excited discoveries sparked esoteric debates for the accountants. Investigators continued asking the A.D.A. about persons of interest she had identified over the last two years as individuals associated with Bill Stokes.

A break came about five o'clock. The Newark accountant had reached an insomniac bank manager on his home phone while he was watching FNN on television. The banker then referenced a downtown Manhattan commodities trader, who was usually in his office overnight to service clients in London and Antwerp. The Jersey office forensic specialist was now reporting his findings, around six thirty in the morning, for the benefit of all who had worked through the night. But mostly he addressed his comments to the two sleep-deprived women sitting in their makeshift kitchen command center in Connecticut.

"Turns out that Bill Stokes overlaid trusts and investments with interwoven obligations. The genius of what he crafted was its simplicity."

Melissa interrupted, "Then why couldn't we find it these past few years?"

"I don't know, Madam D.A.," he said respectfully. "Probably because you were looking for something intricate and illegal. Stokes used none of the tricks of the trade we see manipulated by labor, drug lords, and organized crime, if he even knew of them."

The senior accountant in Manhattan chimed in, "Time's of the essence, here, Marvin. Why not just give us the basics, please."

"Yes, sir. Sorry. Just excited at the find." He drew in a breath, exhaled his cigarette smoke, sipped some cold stale coffee, adjusted himself in his desk chair in front of his computer and started. "Essentially, Stokes built a fail-safe compensation package and pension plan for his employees. He had about four hundred people working for him. Most had young families. These employees needed to rely on that income. More than half became unemployed when all but the last two of Stokes' business interests collapsed. But all the compensation money was paid in small, varying amounts monthly into trusts for mothers of single employees and for spouses of those who were married—using maiden names for more than 80% of the payouts. Most employee names you would have searched for would not be flagged. Statistically, the exceptions were a small minority. Most of his out-of-work employees were men. So, it's reasonable that most would be missed in a random search by your office. Certainly, there are not enough employee names, even surnames, to make a pattern that would stand out like that we often find in organized or conspiratorial fraud. Or money laundering schemes that use the names of deceased persons.

"I was barely able to detect and verify that Stokes and the intact pensions were even remotely involved with the compensation and pensions of the failed companies. But they were all there. Every one of them protected. Each one accounted for and—remarkably

enough—thriving. What little he had left with earning power was supporting what had none.

“It was all legit. All claimed for tax purposes. The banker assured me. And the trader said he’d give us any transaction records we needed. Both just demanded anonymity as a condition. They want nothing to do with the people looking for Stokes.”

Rodriguez was not too tired to wonder aloud how this was missed for so long.

The lead investigator in Manhattan spoke up. “Since no one was present at each of the many contract negotiations, except for Bill Stokes, no one had ever noticed the connections. And until the eventual lump sum pension payouts, no employees benefitting from the scheme would be required to make any claims or report income either.”

Finally, it was Gloria Riding who asked the real important question for the soon-to-be dawning reunion day. “So where does this all go? Where does this all end?” And the last question was actually the same as the first one she asked outside the Garden the day before, “What’s Bill Stokes been up to?”

The Manhattan accountant gave that answer. “There’s only one requirement left for the proper initiation of the future disbursement of funds. The executor of all the accounts must be present to co-sign the automatic and uncontested renewal of the contracts for Stokes’ two remaining firms. At that time the payouts will be adjusted and thereafter be directly made to his former and current employees. These permanent extensions and changes were scheduled as part of contracts negotiated six years ago. The renewal date set back then is now only four months away. But back then, the site and time of the signing were left to be named later. They still have not been, as far as I can discover. And the one person to co-sign is none other than Executor Bill Stokes. So long as his existence is not in doubt—which would cause an inquiry like the one his laundry list just set off overnight—no one in law enforcement would have a reason to go searching to make these discoveries. Until he was ready for them to be made, that is.”

Melissa asked the Newark forensic accountant to stay on the line after everyone else said their goodbyes.

“Marvin, sir. I owe you one. Just name it.”

“Well, I most certainly could use a new pocket protector, Madam ADA.”

“What kind or style would you like, Marvin?”

“How about something in the .25 caliber range, please.”

“Now, Marvin. You know . . .”

“Yes, ma’am.”

"Good night, Marvin."

"Yes, ma'am. You too, ma'am." He was very pleased and looked forward to his new acquisition.

Hanging up the phone and looking out at the early morning light, Assistant District Attorney Rodriguez never thought this bittersweet satisfaction she felt would come from solving the enigma named Bill Stokes. Her satisfaction was enriched by four other news items just confirmed and trailing in over the fax reproduction of a telegram. She smiled and handed the faxgram to a tired, coffee-perking and about-to-be-hostess-with-the-leastest-sleep, and her new-found friend. Gloria read the four-item fax twice. She wanted to make sure she still was able to understand a simple message:

MATHERSON AND DRIVER PICKED UP ON ARREST WARRANTS AT AMTRAK
BRATTLEBORO VT STOP STOKES A NO-SHOW STOP BOTH TRAIN AND
PLANE RESERVATIONS CANCELLED STOP NO CREDIT CARD USE STOP
NO CREDIT CARD CRIME END TRANSMISSION

Gloria Riding set the fax sheet down and glided across the floor. She ducked to avoid choking on the extended cord connecting the wall phone to the fax machine on the table. She passed the coffee pot and reached up to get two clean wine glasses from the cabinet above the refrigerator. With glasses in hand, she opened a lower cabinet door with her foot to disclose a bottle of red wine. Melissa marveled at the smooth gracefulness of the dance. She reached in and took out the bottle.

xi

Together they walked out onto the newly mowed lawn, ignoring the dew in between their bare toes. Four times, once to the east, once to the south, once to the west, and lastly to the north, they raised their glasses and toasted Bill Stokes. Wherever he might be.

They were a strange sight for the floral delivery van driver to see. He slowed to a stop in the driveway and slid open the side door. He carried three floral arrangements to them. "You ladies having a party or something?" Here's best wishes from New York City and Boston and Long Island. Sure am glad they all came in as overnight orders. Elsewise, I'd a had to make three separate trips out here over the course of the day. Have a good time."

"Wait a minute." It occurred to Melissa to ask as he was walking back to the van, "How were these paid for?"

"MasterCard," came the inevitable answer.

There were no messages to say whom the flowers were from. None was necessary. Just a card naming the recipient in each of the smaller pieces, one for Rodriguez and the other for Matherson. They were tidy little arrangements of bleeding hearts for him and mums for her. And for Gloria—a larger, table accent piece—featuring pink and white tufts of Sweet William, accented with blue forget-me-nots.

xii

Down on the north fork of Long Island, Bill Stokes stood on the broad wooden deck overlooking the Pindar Vineyards. Everything was in order. Each row of vines straight as could be. Each diagonal line of sight across from row to row traced another true pattern of straight lines. In the mid-morning fall sunlight, he raised a glass of chardonnay from the tasting room. He faced the northwest and offered a silent toast.